

A P P A L A C H I A N T R A I L

JULIANNA'S HIKE

2009

102.3 MILES FROM RICH VALLEY TO SALT SULPHUR TURNPIKE, VA



“And in the end it's not the the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years” Abraham Lincoln



We are grateful for your heartfelt support of Julianna's Hike. Because of you we raised and donated more than \$60,000 to families in need last year.

Thank you,

Jeff Price,

Dave Guyer,

Steve Doherty,

Murphy Barton

Julianna's Hike has finished its seventh edition. As most of you know we have endured plenty in this effort. Despite the torments of living in the woods away from our families; despite the inconvenience (and danger this year) of traveling to and from our hiking destination and despite the knowledge of physical suffering we will

experience hiking for seven days with up to forty pounds on our back, we return to the Appalachian Trail each year. Why are we coming back to this place that physically hurts us so much? Are we just idiots? Probably, but that is not the real answer we return. Barfy jokingly suggests we hike the first and last day of the week and in between head down to Miami and nobody will be the wiser. If life was about a good tan, we would definitely be there. As I am painfully aware, we are all blessed with a

In our inaugural hike we set a 100 mile goal - we hiked 67 miles that year. After seven years we finally breached the 100 mile barrier. Needless to say, this achievement has been a long time coming.

2009 - 102.3 miles
2008 - 98.2 miles
2007 - 99.1 miles
2006 - 96.8 miles
2005 - 88.6 miles
2004 - 94.9 miles
2003 - 66.8 miles

We have traveled 647 miles in seven years averaging just over 92 miles per year. The entire AT from Georgia to Maine is roughly 2,169 miles leaving 1,522 miles remaining. You can do the math.

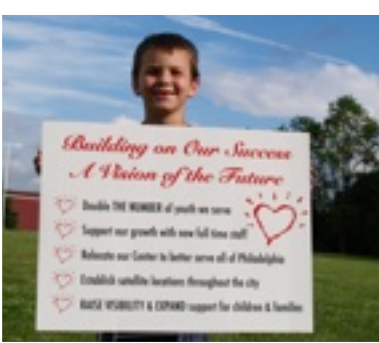
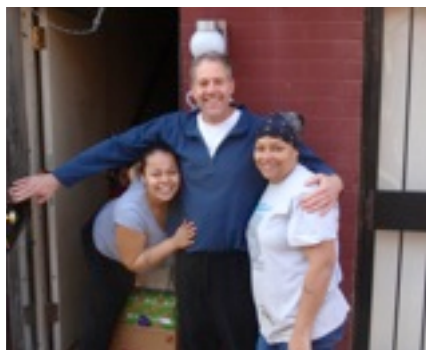
“I have found the paradox that if I love until it hurts, then there is no more hurt, but only more love”
Mother Theresa

limited amount to live our lives. If we focus our existence on superficial joys and the collection of material treasure we will have wasted this opportunity given to us. I like to think we have chosen not to waste our chance. Why do we hike? We hike to be fulfilled through friendship, living fully and love.

Enduring Friendship - It takes a lifetime to establish one great friend. We are all blessed to have three great friends. We would do anything for one another, even hike the Appalachian Trail.

Living Life Fully - Living is not just about work and play, it is about doing right and doing good. The hike and its purpose provides a perspective...we all need to give value to who we are.

Love - This hike is for Julianna. Although she only lived for three years, she has given us a lifetime of love. We return to this hike each year to honor this love and to share it with you.



In seven years of hiking the Appalachian Trail, we have raised and donated more than \$325,000. Last year the following organizations received more than \$60,000 in funding from the Julianna Hike Fund. Thank You

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

For the 7th 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 five years I have witnessed the work this organization has accomplished as a board member. Below are our future plans for the center to help us serve more children.

**Building on Our Success
A Vision of the Future**

- * Double the number of youth we serve
- * Support our growth with new full 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.
WWW.BREATHINGROOMFOUNDATION.ORG](http://www.breathingroomfoundation.org)

This is our 5th 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
- *Nutritional supplements
- *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 the these programs. The joy this organization provides suffering families is needed and overwhelming. At this time they have extensive need for their services, so our help is critical.

[HOPEWORKS N CAMDEN
\(www.hopeworks.org\)](http://www.hopeworks.org)

This is our 2nd 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 see their work go to www.juliannahike.org.

[ST BARTHOLOMEW OUTREACH PROGRAM](#)

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 fifth 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. They are struggling to stay afloat in the current economic crisis so our help is needed.

“When I do good I feel good, when I do bad I feel bad and that is my religion”

Abraham Lincoln

The rubber is about to meet the road...We are one day from departure. Tomorrow we will fly to Roanoke to commence our hike on the Appalachian Trail to remember Julianna. Today is my day of reflection and the start of my week in search of meaning. I become deeply saddened as I acknowledge the reason we are heading out on this hike. My cardboard walls of strength carefully constructed over the last year begin crashing down around me. When I re-enter this abyss, I am a completely humbled man. But with this humility, I have an opportunity to unburden my heart. By the end of this week, I will hopefully release some of my pain and let more love in. Of course, the journey deep into my soul is not without a few detours. Streek, Barfy and Giggles will make sure of that. If I wanted a peaceful hiking experience with mature individuals, I would probably be hiking with three other guys, however, hiking with knuckleheads is my cross to bear and actually much more entertaining.

A few days prior to departure, I check in with my crusaders to confirm a few things much like I have done each year. Most importantly, I confirm they are showing up. Barfy is my first call. He confirms his attendance and proudly tells me he is on a diet, which he began approximately three days before the hike. His rationale was to lose five pounds prior to departure expecting this last minute effort to make his hiking experience more agreeable. On the other end of the phone I can only shake my head. Next - Giggles confirms his attendance and maintains his status as the most committed and resented (by

Streek and Barfy for taking this hiking thing seriously) hiker after telling me he is confirmed taking the red eye to Roanoke from Salt Lake. He wanted to be certain he would be in Roanoke early and ready to go. Lastly, I check with Streek. He also confirms his attendance, but lets me know the combination of pre-hike jitters and leaving his family for 8 days has created some anxiety and made it difficult to sleep. Me - I am generally prepared to go, but concerned about my bad knee. On the last night before departure my boys want to say good bye to me by competing in a tag team wrestling match. A few minutes into the battle, I raise the white flag. In my quick defeat, I hurt my toe and back but thankfully not the bad knee. I am whimpering in pain. There are a few things I know, one is humility, which has a way of following me wherever I go.

The best part of section hiking the Appalachian Trail is limiting our torture to one week each year. Conversely, the bad part of section hiking the Appalachian Trail each year is the need to travel a long distance to where we finished the last year. This year we need to travel 425 miles to get to our starting point at Rich Valley, Virginia. Barfy and Giggles have considerably further to travel coming from Toronto, Canada and Park City, Utah.

For the second year in a row Streek, Barfy and I converge at Philadelphia Int'l Airport for a flight into Roanoke. Just like last year Barfy is enjoying a beverage at the Jet Rock Bar and Grill when Streek and I arrive. Unlike last year, when they almost missed the departing flight, I am not foolish enough to leave these guys alone to their own devices. When they are together and a bar is nearby, they need adult supervision.

I follow behind these two, not permitting them out of my site. We hand over our boarding passes and head out to the tarmac in deep conversation. Barfy was telling me to relax and I was telling him this is not a resort vacation, this is a hike in the woods. We arrive at our plane confused. This plane was heading to Rochester. We abruptly turnaround to find the next plane on the tarmac. As we enter Flight 4403 to Roanoke Barfy asks the flight attendant, Heather, one question - “Does this thing have a bathroom?” The flight attendant politely lets Barfy know that it does. “Great...I will take two cold ones.” So much for convincing him this is not a vacation.



We buckle into our seats in the rear of the plane. Before long our Bombardier CRJ is heading southwest to the Appalachian Mountains carrying 20 passengers, a pilot, a co-pilot and Heather, who dutifully brought back a few beverages. The weather at the time was overcast. Moreover, a storm was barreling eastbound directly in our flight path. As usual, Barfy and Streek were creating a ruckus with anyone in their personal perimeter. This time it was Heather, who resided outside Roanoke and had hiked the Appalachian Trail. Ironically, she had met our driver Homer on the trail a few weeks prior. We were telling her of Homer's exploits and generally yucking it up when we hit severe turbulence. The beverages flew all over the place. It was a rough few moments, but anyone who has flown a lot has been through worse. Moments later the female co-pilot stepped through the cock pit door and asked Heather to join her and the pilot in the cock pit. At this time nothing appeared amiss except that the co-pilot was drenched. I noticed her dripping wet with perspiration and repeatedly wiping her brow with a handkerchief. She quipped, "Whew, is it hot in here?" Heather nods to her and heads to the cockpit. The three hikers resume talking about the trip and Homer. After several minutes Heather departs the cockpit with a purpose and a sobering announcement.



"There appears to be a severe problem with the plane, we will need to make to an emergency landing at the nearest airport and prepare for a crash landing." The unforeseen statement hit us like punch in the face. I look over to my left at Barfy and Streek and say, "this cannot be real." The plane starts banking hard to the right in an abrupt maneuver. Barfy, looking quite unrelaxed asks forcefully, "Is the landing gear down?" I look out the window. I cannot see landing gear but I can see farms, country side and mountain ridges below. Actually, looked like a pleasant enough place to crash. After the initial shock blasted by Heather, she keeps up the torrent of nerve rattling information. She systemically and quite professionally, instructs each passenger individually the art of the crash position: Keep your head down and stay down and brace for landing. I like to think I can read people pretty well. There was no doubt her actions and tone made it clear she believed there was a decent probability of crashing. As we proceed to our destination, wherever that is, Heather buckles into her own seat and begins the chant, "Head Down/Stay Down, Head Down/Stay Down." Here we are...Streek, Barfy and Jules heading to the Appalachian Trail to honor Julianna moments away from joining her in heaven. Barfy with head down tells me, "I think the landing gear is stuck" and asks me again, "Is landing gear down?" My head was down and I had no intention of lifting it. I tell him "I have no frickin clue." My mind at this point is racing. Head Down/Stay Down echoes again and again. I am now reflecting on my life, my boys at home and especially Denise, who has lost more in her life than anyone I know. As we descend I remember thinking I can't believe this is happening. There have been countless days I would have willingly accepted death over life. Today was not one of them. Streek reaches over and says "I love you guys." We tell him the same.

As we were about to land or smash into the ground, Heather's chant hit its crescendo. "HEAD DOWN/STAY DOWN - HEAD DOWN/STAY DOWN." When the wheels hit the tarmac everyone exhaled in an enormous and collective sigh of relief. We all finally lift our heads up and high five one another. Barfy starts to clap. Without missing a beat Streek tells him, "Stop being such a dork." As the plane rolls to a stop, we look out the window to see our destination - Charlottesville, Virginia. We are quite pumped to be living and did not care if we were in Timbuktu. We eagerly depart the plane. Barfy, still giddy about being alive, gives Heather a bear hug and twists her around in the air like a rag doll. Streek and me, in need of amusement, laugh out loud at this sight. In reality, she performed quite professionally on this flight and deserved a good twirl.

Fortunately, US Air has arranged transportation for the 120 mile ride to Roanoke. Although our nerves are completely frayed, we are off the plane and elated. We wait in line with our fellow tormented passengers for the ride to Roanoke. Fortunately, our salvation arrives in the form of a transplanted English cabbie named Andy. Things were now looking up as we now had a private ride to Roanoke from a guy with a fancy accent.

“I see God in every human being”

Mother Theresa

We arrive at Roanoke roughly 6 hours after departure from Philadelphia and reunite with Giggles, who arrived early this morning. We hit downtown Roanoke for our last meal and recount our terrifying trip to him. In recounting our horror a few items stand out. First, we were an estimated fifteen minutes from Roanoke when the flight was diverted for a ten minute horrifying detour to Charlottesville. It made no sense unless they suspected the plane was about to fall from the sky. Second, during the white knuckle detour, Barfy kept trying to pray the Hail Mary but couldn't get past, “the Lord is with thee” with all the shouting in the cabin and the Head Down/ Stay Down chant.



Every year we are asked and always wonder how much weight we lose during the hike. This year we have the opportunity to find out. The Hotel Roanoke has a functioning scale in the workout area. We strip down and weigh in. Barfy is the clear winner and weighs in at 252 lbs; Jules is next at 242 lbs; Giggles is a distant third at 216 lbs. Finally, the feather weight Streek weighs in at a measly 202 lbs, a weight Barfy and Jules have not seen since tenth grade. Our cumulative weight without back packs is an impressive 912 lbs. After the official weigh in we head back to our room to inventory equipment and food. Everybody unloads food on the bed. Streek unloads just five Power Bars and no dinners. Making this effort extraordinarily pathetic is that I actually gave him three of his Power Bars a few hours earlier. It has become customary for Streek to bring virtually no food, however, this year he upped the ante and also failed to bring anything that carries water (bottle or bladder) or anything that prevents water (rain poncho). If preparation is key to success, we are doomed.

We awake in a restless mood. After our inflight experience we are quite relieved to be hitting the trail until we read the unsettling news on the front page of the Roanoke Times while eating breakfast. It reads, “Two Virginia Tech students murdered while camping in Jefferson National Forest.” The Appalachian Trail runs through the Jefferson National Forest. We haven't even started hiking yet and we already had two nerve rattling shocks to our systems. I immediately think of the drifter we had met last year on the trail. Not only are there two families suffering immeasurable pain over this senseless loss, there is a killer or killers at large. The two victims are David Metzler, 19 and Heidi Childs, 18 who had dated since high school. Their futures were taken away in a brief moment in a scene the local sheriff called brutal and ugly. I cannot help but relate this to Julianna's sudden loss. Eleven months after their deaths, the killer remains at large.



At about 8 am, Homer Witcher arrives to take us to the trail. We have a ninety minute drive to Rich Valley. We ask Homer about the murders, but he knows nothing. We start our journey to the trail. First we need to find hiking equipment for our absent minded hiking buddy...Streek. The only store open at this early hour is Walmart. Streek and Barfy head into this mega store and I realize I may not see these two for three hours. In the past I used to get upset when these guys demonstrated a lack of concern for the schedule or my hike agenda. I now try to take our healthy differences in stride, just shake my head, and remind myself to pray and go with the flow. To my amazement they come out of the store in under fifteen minutes.

Our 110 mile ride through the Virginia country side is beautiful. We first head south on I-81, then north on I-77. Barfy, in a never ending journey to lift his spirits and live in the moment, eyes a Subway sign as we get off I-77. He says, “Subway... lets grab a hoagie for lunch?” We have been away from civilization for approximately 1 1/4 hours and he needs a refresh. My head almost explodes as I say, “Hell no.” Barfy responds, “Your no fun.” We head north traveling through picturesque valleys with rustic homes and farms. We arrive at Rich Valley at 10:30 am. We load our water bottles and bladders with the water Streek purchased at the Walmart. We say goodbye to Homer and convene as a group in a circle.

Day One - August 29, 2009 (11.1 miles)

We say our morning prayer giving thanks the four of us, the best of friends, are together for one more year. We are grateful for the simple joy of being united. I give thanks and my love to Julianna. We then proceed straight up steep Brushy Mountain fully loaded with gear, food and water. Welcome back to the Appalachian Trail! Our first steps require us to elevate 1,000' in under a mile. Literally, I am out of breath after 75 yards of hiking. The combination of the weight and slope are more overwhelming than I remember from our previous six years. Then again, I am now almost 45 year old, weigh 280 pounds including backpack, and my waist line is now a 40, which is 3-4 inches more when we started this hike in 2003. In my struggle, I start to realize I only have myself to blame for my own lack of long term conditioning. On second thought this can't be right. Why would I blame myself for my current plight? Instead, I will the point the finger of blame at someone else...that is so much easier. It's not my fault I am fat: It is my wife's fault who leaves too much ice cream, cookies and candy in the house.; It's not my fault I'm out of shape: It's my work schedule or the kids that demand all my attention or a drive somewhere when I get home from work. It's not my fault we aren't a better hiking team: Do you know how much further I could be on this trail if my three co-hikers acted their age? There are times in life when other people hold you back, but their are far greater times when you hold yourself back. We all have a choice in life. Don't blame others for your choices. If you need to point a finger make sure the first point turns back to you. Right now I am pointing a finger at myself for being such a load. The mile walk to the top of Brushy Mountain was a quick reminder I need to be in better shape and that hiking with full packs sucks.



When we arrive at Knot Maul Branch Shelter we are all relieved to be taking a break from the overwhelming weight of our backpacks. In this short ten minute break, my muscles begin to tighten and my right knee, which has given me much trouble, begins to ache. Not a good start. The rest of our day goes like this : down 500 feet, up 500 feet, down 500 feet, flat for a bit and then up 2,200 feet to end this short, but rather difficult day. The terrain is similar to what we have seen before. Trees, dirt and rocks are served every day on the Appalachian Trail menu. Of course, Streek can order from this menu. As he likes to say, "we will eat this trail up."

The goal today is Chestnut Knob Shelter at the top of Chestnut Ridge, which at 4,409 ft elevation will be highest point on the AT this year. Chestnut Knob Shelter is a former fire warden house. More importantly to us, it is one of the few fully enclosed shelters on the entire AT. This fact provides me some solace as the thought of a murderer on the loose in Jefferson National Forest remains in the back of my mind. Before our upward march to Chestnut Ridge we pass over a foot bridge at Lick Creek (2,200 feet elevation) which is our lowest elevation of the day. Considering we started the day so late, we are losing day light. Adding to the darkness are the ominous clouds forming overhead. After making this upward assault on the mountain for hours, we eventually leave the thick woods and enter an open field or as they call them "balds" at the top of Chestnut Ridge. We appreciate the change. This bald is mowed periodically offering an important habitat for migratory song birds. The water we filled up on this morning is just about gone. It is late in the afternoon and we need to find water, especially since our shelter has the luxury of 4 walls and a door, but no water. Consequently, we need to carry in.



“Whatever you are be a good one”

Abraham Lincoln

The guide books tells us there are two water sources to consider. Both are ponds and only one is reliable. We arrive at our first pond...the reliable one. We observe a stagnant pond with vegetation surrounding it and roughly one million gnats circling above it. Decision time! Do we risk going to the next pond or do we suck it up and take the bird in hand? We are virtually bone dry so we opt to pump this disgusting water. Barfy, in a never ending effort to pretend like he is not actually roughing it in the woods, brought a portable shower this year. It is essentially a plastic bag with a hook on one end and a plastic shower head on the other. Honestly, it was pointless as a shower but worked perfectly to scoop up rancid pond water. After we collected the water, we filtered it and put it in plastic jugs for transport. We used two filter pumps for this operation...almost. On the very first attempt, Giggles pump breaks down filtering the slimy water. After five hours of hiking we are left with one pump and no margin for error over the remainder of our hike. Streek and I have the honors to carry the jugs the mile or so to our shelter. Streek loaded his water on top of his backpack while I carried the other jug in my hands. About half way to our destination, Streek rolled an ankle on the edge of the uneven trail and fell over with momentum. The water weight on top of his bag propelled him straight in to the dirt in a beautiful face plant. I saw the entire event unfold in front of my eyes and feared the worst. It was ugly. This was the type of event that ends a hike, especially with Streek's skinny ankles. Streek is down for the count and groaning. Usually, I would just laugh at him for being clumsy, but this appeared to be bad. After a few more groans, I help Streek to his feet. He gathers himself, evens out the wrinkles on his rumpled clothes, fixes his hair and starts to walk on with only a slight limp. He is a tough man. We continue forward, pass the other water source, which was really nasty and arrive at our shelter as a steady rain begins to fall at 5:45 pm. We are exhausted but relieved to be in this all stone shelter.



The rain was pouring down with abandon as Giggles and

Barfy arrived minutes behind us. We give each other big hugs for making it to the top of this mountain and are very pleased to have completed our first day. Of course, Barfy is in sheer joy. He unhinges his pack and starts to root through his bag. First, he pulls out and changes into his new full body black underwear with matching black hood.

Second, he pulls out an iPod with a set of dinky portable speakers. Finding peace, harmony and being one with nature are not high on Barfy's priority list. Instead, before you know it, we are treated to a large man in a skin tight outfit singing Credence Clearwater Revival's Bad Moon Rising, which is reverberating throughout our four walled shelter and the Chestnut Ridge. I just shake my head in wonder as I witness a spectacle that very few AT hikers have ever seen or probably would ever want to see while camping at 4,000' elevation.



Nobody, and I mean nobody goes from complete misery to total glory like our man Barfy. He was feeling so good he opened up a sealed letter from his lovely wife, which was meant to be opened after day two. That sealed letter had no chance of lasting two days. But I give him credit for waiting to be on the trail before he opened it. This thoughtful and funny letter can be found on the next page.



As we prepare for sleep, I have last choice for bunks and get the priveledge of sleeping close to the shelter entrance. I am thinking about those two young people who died two nights ago and their killer. He could be on the Appalachian Trail looking for a good place to hide or worse. I

look at the door and notice a small string attached to the door handle. I tie this string to the frame of the bunk adjacent to the door. I immediately recognize the futility of this effort as a strong gust of wind would have broken the knot.

Nevertheless, I leave my facade of security in place for the long night ahead.

Hi my sweet wonderful husband,

I am hoping that you got this letter at the end of day 2 of your hike because I know this was the worst day for you guys and I thought a little sweet treat might make you feel better.

I hope everything is going good and I hope you haven't thrown up yet because if you haven't after day two, you probably won't. I just wanted to let you know that I am so proud of you for doing this, I think it's so awesome, (I can't believe its 7 years). I know it is so bitter sweet for all of you because you look so forward to seeing each other and spending time together but I know it's a lot of hard work, sleepless nights, crappy food, and it is very hard on your forty something year old bodies.

Murphy I know you are the toughest guy out there. I am so proud that you can do this hike without really getting ready for it. I'd like to see those guys drink a case of beer every week all summer, get 4 hours of TV in everyday, nap on weekends, eat pizza and wings 4 times a week, pack the night before the hike AND STILL FINISH THE HIKE EVERY SINGLE YEAR....I bet they couldn't do it ☺

Please tell Steve that I think he is a wonderful person and a wonderful father, and there is no better way that he can honor the memory of his beautiful daughter. He is doing a great job with the foundation and the news letter, and the hike planning.

Thank Jeff for me because I know he is keeping a smile on your face and I know his encouraging words help you so much throughout this hike. Murphy, you always say when you grow up you want to be just like Jeff....well that's a great thing to strive for, so thank him for that too...just kidding baby.

Dave, well what can I say about Dave? Just tell him he is our sunshine. I know his laughter cracks you up, so he should do a lot of that. I know you say he is organized and positive and caring and sweet (god he sounds like a girl). I'm sure he's the one you can talk to the most on this hike because you both love politics
Tell him I miss him, and can't wait until he comes to Canada.

Well Murph, good luck getting through the rest of the week. My thoughts are with guys every step of the way. Have fun, be strong, be thankful, and try to enjoy it. I miss you and I love you so much....Lots of hugs and kisses to all of you (and Dave gets a hugg squeeze too) Love you Murphy

Nicol

Day Two - August 30, 2009 (21.5 Miles)

We wake up. This is always a good thing when you have a murderer on your mind when going to bed. By 9 am we load up and depart this memorable shelter. We say our morning prayer. "Let us all appreciate this moment, this challenge and give everything we have because we will need it." Yesterday was a difficult day with extreme elevation. Today will provide a substantially greater challenge - 21.5 miles in one day. That is crazy!



Our first mile is a straight drop one thousand feet into Walker Gap (3,520' elevation). After Walker Gap, we elevate and reach the top of a high knoll and take a break. I take out a chocolate Power Bar and offer a bite to Barfy. He accepts and comments, "Ugh, that tastes like chalk." Not sure how he would know that (probably one of his six older brothers teaching him a lesson) but I accepted his culinary critique and moved on.

We begin to walk over a series of mountain ridges with a severe drop off on either side of the trail. The ridge walking required more concentration than most of us cared to put forth this early in the day. Next, we ascend Garden Mountain and proceed onto the majestic Burke Gardens, known as one of the prettier stops on the Appalachian Trail. This 9 mile by 5 mile valley is surrounded on all sides by mountains and is commonly referred to as God's Footprint or Tranquility Bowl. It is one of those locations you stop, absorb, and thank god you are alive. It is magnificent or so we hear. We didn't see any of it. We were blocked by a tree canopy and elected not to waste any unnecessary energy on a quick side trip on a 21.5 mile day. The lack of effort is lame, but those are the compromises you make when you are trying to reach 100 miles of hiking in one week, especially when you failed each of the previous 6 years. Instead we dutifully march on through cob webs and on terrain that changes from uneven rock, to flat dirt trail, back to uneven rock again.

After lunch, we regroup and prepare ourselves for an exhaustive 700' climb up Brushy Mountain. This climb is agonizing as our tight muscles and full water loads add perfectly to the misery. After this initial climb we have a steady decline over more rocky terrain to Little Wolf Creek and Laurel Creek. On this jaunt Giggles and Streak are stung by bees. We reach Little Wolf and break. The creek is one hundred yards or so down a steep wooded embankment. For those of you who have read about Barfy over the years, you know when it comes to water he is a like a golden retriever. First he hears it, then he finds it and lastly he splashes around in it. Even though we are 14 miles into our day and physically wiped out, Barfy makes his move to the creek while the rest of us lay down. After the break we move lethargically down Virginia State Road 615. We proceed back in to the woods on a rhododendron lined trail at Laurel Creek and come upon a styrofoam cooler. We almost pass the cooler when Barfy, who has a sixth sense for sniffing out comfort, tells us to open it up. We hesitate...he does not. Inside was heaven. A cooler filled with ice and about a dozen orange, grape and fruit punch gatorade bottles. The joy in our faces was so genuine and real. Life's simple pleasures are enjoyed most when you have little pleasure (like now) and when they are least expected (like now). We each drank a bottle and wrote a thank you note. The only piece of identification on this cooler was an unmarked bible inside a ziploc bag. There are angels out there and they provided for us in a time of need. Thank you trail angels. We move on with renewed spirit and with the reminder that there is good all around us.



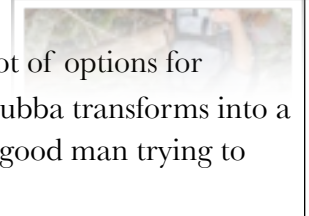
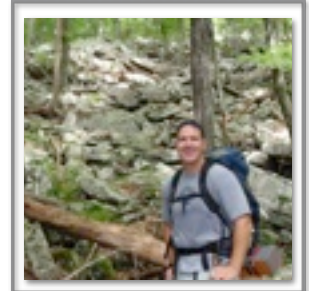
It is now about 3 pm and we have another 6.9 miles left in this terribly long day. Although we are exhausted we are re-energized. Our destination is U.S. Highway 52 and the Big Walker Motel. We will be staying in a bed tonight at a roadside motel. The last seven miles of this day push us to our limits, but the bed we will sleep in tonight and the reminder of others kindness will make these last miles go a little easier. We finally arrive at Big Walker Motel at 7 pm. Although impressive, today's effort will leave a heavy toll on our bodies. I now have a swollen knee which is

“What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway”

Mother Theresa

difficult to bend, a rash all over my back and chest, and blisters on both my toes and heel. Even with all that, I am in the the place I belong. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but here right now with my buddies and Julianna.

The Big Walker Motel was not the Ritz, however, it did have a bed, a shower and a location next to a Kangaroo/Dairy Queen Gas Station. The manager at this fine establishment was a feller named Bubba. I am not sure what it was about the south but we have now met two people on this hike - Homer and Bubba. I truly enjoy meeting these new people along the trail and learning about their lives. It seems everyone has an interesting story, including Bubba. He had moved to Bland from Virginia Beach a while back to enjoy the outdoors and pursue one of his passions...hunting. He also was looking for a fresh career start. For many years he worked at a small manufacturing company where his brother was his foreman. He was a hard worker who believed he deserved better pay for his job. His brother agreed but declined due to the appearance of nepotism. Bubba, a proud man, promptly quit and moved to the mountains. As you could surmise, this part of Appalachia does not provide a lot of options for employment so here is Bubba at the Big Walker. Gruff in appearance and manner at first, Bubba transforms into a man of genuine decency after talking to him for a few minutes. Like so many others, he is a good man trying to find his place in the world.



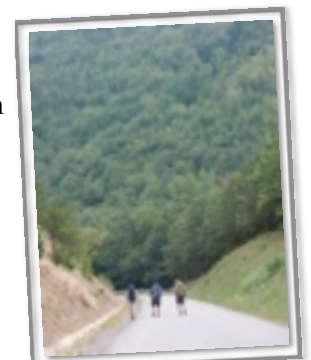
Day Three - August 31, 2009 (12.1 miles)

The Big Walker Motel overlooked I-77 and was anything but swank. But for the four of us, it was ideal. Fortunately, we have a little extra time this morning to get breakfast since Bubba kindly offered to drive us back to our trail head, roughly a mile from the motel. Before departure, we walk over to Dairy Queen for breakfast. The breakfast choices are a breakfast burrito or an Oreo Blizzard. Unfortunately, we choose the burrito, which was horrible. We gather our gear and pile into the back of Bubba's old pick up truck and head back to the trail. Bubba drove the entire one mile distance at full acceleration and passed our previous stopping point by a wide margin. After some dispute, Bubba backs up and drops us off at the correct spot.

We gear up and walk the remaining distance on the roadway until we reach the woods again. We then stop, form our circle and pray. “We are thankful for the gift this hike has given us, especially me. We have developed a strong sense of purpose and determination in this effort. I am hopeful we can transfer this determination to other parts of our life and try to make a difference.”

We are back in the wilderness when Streck laments, “I can't believe after all of that, we didn't even get a blizzard from Dairy Queen.” Our departing time is 10 am. Our bodies are pretty beat up from yesterday's marathon and we feel quite lethargic this morning. On the first big hill, Barfy states “I gotta stop I think I am having a heart attack.” This gets our attention so we stop.

If you consider a heart attack as a genuine risk you gotta believe Barfy, like me, fits the profile. In a split second, I can identify some of his high risk characteristics. He likes beer in excess - check, he has a stressful sales job - check, he is just a tad overweight - check, he exercises only one week per year - check, he loves red meat - double check and lastly, he receives the worst healthcare in North America under a nationalized Canadian health care system -



check. On the flip side, there are reasons not to worry. First, he has no known family history - check, why the hell worry about something that hasn't happened yet - check, and lastly, more than likely he is using this scare tactic to slow the pace on the ascent - check. Nevertheless, we are at the right age for concern, so we better be mindful for signs of extreme stress. Saying you are having a heart attack may be one of those signs.

Fortunately, today is a great day to hike and relax. We only have 12.1 miles on mostly flat terrain. Our first waypoint is Kimberling Creek Valley, which has a scenic view when foliage is not on the trees. This is summer time on the Appalachian Trail so it goes without saying we can see absolutely nothing but leaves and trees. For much of the day we will be walking on a ridge line over another mountain called Brushy. No, you are not crazy (or maybe you are crazy if you have paid this much attention to detail in this newsletter). This is the third Brushy Mountain we have traversed. Over the years many a hiker has commented that every mountain in Virginia is named Brushy. In fact, there are nine mountains in Virginia named Brushy, and four others named Brush Mountain.

Life on the trail is good right now. Giggles comments, "this is the way hiking should be - flat terrain and a slow pace." We even start to notice and appreciate the world around us. We see hundreds of mushrooms along the trail...big ones, small ones, orange ones, brown ones, ugly ones and uglier ones. Besides enjoying the surrounding beauty, we also listen to each others life stories, some for the 1st time...some for the 10th time.



When we are out of breath and stressed we don't focus on small little pains such as a blister on your toe or a knee that is a little swollen. On a day like today when the trail is easier, however, we all become more aware of our minor pains and struggles. This a much like our daily lives.

When we are exposed to less stress, we tend to focus on smaller issues and make them into larger ones. On the flip side, when we have a full plate and experience more stress we tend to put the smaller issues into proper perspective. We all seem to want an easier and stress free existence. Thats great...if you seek this, you will not grow personally and you may be ill prepared to deal with life's larger issues when they arise. Life should be about balance. Enjoy your life but get out of your comfort zone! If you take on a challenge (preferably doing something for others), it is impossible not to gain a little perspective that will give your life greater meaning.

When Streck heads down our third Brushy Mountain of the week, his knee finally gives way requiring a very slow and painful descent. Even with this slow pace, we arrive at Jenny Knob Shelter by 4:25 pm. This is a rare feat for us. We have walked 12.1 miles in 6.5 hours on our easiest day on the trail ever. When we arrive, our antennas' are on full alert. There is a tent in our shelter and a murderer on the loose. Three of us convene in a show of strength around the shelter, when a bearded scruffy face emerges. The face says, "how you dudes doing?" Barfy eyes him extra suspiciously. During this engagement, Giggles walks up unaware there is anyone else at this campsite. He looks in at the shelter and almost jumps out of his boots when he sees the bearded face move. The man promptly introduces himself as "Chipmunk", which is probably not the kind of name that reigns fear on the AT. Not to mention the guy had to weigh less than half of Barfy or me. Chipmunk politely offers to move his tent out of the shelter to make room for us. Our nearly half ton hiking team quickly overwhelmed the campsite and the meager Chipmunk. In a surge of chaotic energy we unload our gear in a pile in the shelter, retrieve water, wash up and prepare our freeze dried dinners. Beef Teriyaki and Pasta Primavera were served this evening, which sounds better than they taste. The meals are not horrible, but after seven year of eating this stuff they have become progressively less desirable. In fact, I am now at the point that the thought of eating one of these meals makes me want to puke. We finish our nightly camp duties in record time.



“Things may come to those who wait, but only the things left by those who hustle”

Abraham Lincoln

By 6 pm we settle in and are afforded time to relax. Barfy and I seek to relax. Our only motivation is to sit on the picnic table resting our oversized bodies. Conversely, Streek seeks out some form of entertainment. Giggles, the other skinny hiker, joins him in his pursuit to find something for us to do. I begin reading an interesting fact about the trail in a guide book. I offer to share this book with my fellow gargantuan hiker. Of course, Barfy brings relaxation to a whole new level. He holds a black belt and a doctorate in “energy conservation.” He looks at the book, and says, “this is my time, Barfy doesn’t read books on his time, he is read to.” I laugh at his apathy and dutifully read him the passage. Moments later, the energetic skinny guys, Streek and Giggles call us over. They have a total of four flat rocks (2 red/2 black) in their hands and two hiking poles stuck into the ground 20 feet apart. We are in the mountains so our field of play is on a large slope. Streek gives us the rules on the fly. Like horseshoes, the objective is to get the red or black rock closest to the pole. The closest rock gets a point. Streek’s clever little game seems simple enough. On August 31, 2010, a new game is created - Appalachian Horse Shoes.



We begin the game. Streek and I are paired up against Giggles and Barfy. We split the first two games. Our third game is the tie breaker and becomes quite raucous quickly. Streek and I take the early lead as the crowd begins to form to watch the spectacle. The crowd is named Chipmunk who awoke from his nap to see what all the excitement was about. We explain Streek’s new game. “Dude that is cool” is the mellow response. “I am definitely going to play this game with other hikers.” I can just see it now. Streek, Appalachian Horse Shoe inventor, leaves dental practice to promote his new blockbuster game touring currently with Chipmunk. We were well on their way to victory when one of our rocks broke in half. This shattered our mojo. Giggles and Barfy take advantage and win the inaugural Appalachian Horse Shoe championship. Damn them!

We retire to our camp fire with our entire fan base following us. Chipmunk is like many people who hike the Appalachian Trail. He has no job and he has no home. He travels the trail or other trails year round and lives in the wilderness. When he needs a place to go he stays with his sister. He has a simple and genuine existence. He is man who appreciates the solitude and peace of the wilderness having no interest in keeping up with the Joneses. No sitting at a desk for 50 hours a week. Just him, his back pack and mother nature. Chipmunk is heading south. He began his current tour of duty in Northern Virginia a month or so ago. His pace is slow and deliberate, allowing him to savor the surroundings, exactly the opposite of our style. In the last few weeks he had seen six bears and several copper head snakes. I start to wonder why the four of us have not seen more bear or any wildlife for that matter lately. After I compare the differences in our hiking styles, it becomes quite apparent to me. When Chipmunk walks through the woods he is like a fox, light of foot and not making a sound. When the four of us walk through the woods we are like a thundering herd of elephants yelping along the way. No wonder nature is avoiding us...I would too. At 8:30 pm, we call it a night and, within minutes, I feel a mouse run across my leg. How about that? Maybe all of nature doesn’t stay clear of us. We talk briefly about the wonderful day we just enjoyed. Giggles



summed it up best when he told us the only bad thing about today was the bumpy 90 mph ride in the back of Bubba's truck. Now that is a good day.

Day 4 - September 1, 2009 (14.2 miles)

Hoooooot...Hoooooot...Hoooooot...The sounds of nature are truly spectacular, except when they are hampering your sleep after three days of hiking. Throughout the night, we had the company of a noisy hoot owl. Apparently, owls hoot to communicate. They are either telling you to stay away (territorial) or come and get me (in heat). I just wished they would take their rap somewhere else. All night I was forced to duck my head inside my sleeping bag while curling up in the fetal position to muffle the noise and also avoid freezing. It was a frosty night. In fact, most of the week we have experienced unseasonably cool weather. This created enjoyable hiking temperatures but miserable sleeping conditions. Life always provides a balance.

Morning arrives too soon. In the frigid Appalachian air, we must leave the semi-warmth of our sleeping bags. Although we are freezing, we dress in slow motion. I am so freaking sore right now. We finally get it together and prepare to depart from this place when the chilled Chipmunk emerges from his tent. We talk briefly. Barfy begins peppering him with questions on the trail ahead. With amazing detail he tells us the condition of the trail over the next few days. I admire his recollection. He tells us of rocky conditions past Pearisburg and a place called the "green tunnel." Lastly, Chipmunk tells us of a great place to order a cheeseburger and a milkshake at VA 606 about a mile off the trail. I hear these words and cringe. I wished Chipmunk stayed in his tent, because I know what is next. Barfy may as well just won the lottery. Where is this place exactly? How far from the trail? His mind is now in overdrive contemplating cheeseburgers and chocolate shakes. Immediately, he says we are stopping and just as quickly I counter with, "bullshit on that." I can't fathom for a second why we would stop and Barfy cannot understand for a second why we would we not. Our dose of Appalachian Trail differences and resulting tension have returned.

My philosophy: The hike is a difficult journey, taken one step at a time providing an opportunity to live life modestly for a short time, while appreciating life's simple pleasures without the distraction of modern life. The more challenges we endure, the greater is our reward. Consequently, more indulgences of civilization lessens this ultimate reward. Every year, I feel blessed to be taking this hike with three great individuals. As long as we are taking this hike, we should endeavor to take advantage of the solitude, sacrifice, and peace it provides.

Barfy's Philosophy: I would do anything for my friends even hike this god forsaken trail, however, any chance I have to get off this dirt path and back to civilization I am taking. Truth be told - I appreciate Jules naturalist perspective, but the hike is self imposed misery so why not lessen this misery whenever possible. More importantly, our team motto is, "we take whatever the trail gives us." Today, the trail is giving us cheeseburgers.

We say goodbye to Chipmunk and depart at 9:15 am. We circle together at the trail head and pray for everyone who has lost a loved one, especially the families of the young couple killed in Jefferson National Forest. "May they stay forever in our hearts always remembering what they gave to us and what they mean to us."

The first mile is flat, leading to a moderate heart thumping climb. We break and descend into Lickskillet Hollow, the home of thousands of trees and the green tunnel. The dense rhododendron's and Hemlock's form a dense tunnel, enclosing around you in a sea of green.



“Love does not measure, it just gives”

The lead hiker is forced to swallow the cob webs, which are reconstructed every night by determined spiders. This morning the cob webs are particularly dense. At this point I am not in the lead and I am at peace until I think of cheeseburgers.

Streek and I are walking together and I ask him to do me a favor, “Barfy is killing me...tell him you don’t need a cheeseburger.” Streek listens sympathetically and responds, “well my molecular physiology is in tune and synergistic with this vast ecosystem and at this time I do not require fast food consumables.” I am relieved...I think. Then he reverts to the dark side and says, “screw that I am getting a cheeseburger.” As I always say, I am blessed and cursed to have these guys on this hike. Right now I am cursed.

We continue northward and cross over our fourth or fifth Brushy Mountain, which provides a majestic view of Wolf Creek Mountain to the west and a beautiful valley below. We stop for a break. We talk and soak in the Appalachian scenery. Barfy, the hike cartographer (so designated because he stares at the elevation map all day long), names it “Valley of the Palm.” After the break we saddle up. Barfy takes the lead giving his battle cry, “I need a cheeseburger” and he is off. I seethe of course. We begin a 500’ descent down Brushy Mountain to Va 606 and the Kimberling Creek suspension bridge. This walking bridge extends 150’ and is 34’ tall spanning Kimberling Creek. It is one of the most substantial foot only bridges on the entire 2,169 mile trail. We cross the bridge with out event until Giggles tests its durability and starts shaking the bridge. We convene on the other side. Without any hesitation Barfy bulldozes, “who is coming with me to get a cheeseburger?” Giggles giggles and says, “I am in.” I am clearly not in. Streek decides to wait with me, but says, “bring me back a chocolate shake too” as they depart. I try to be openminded, but I can’t understand why anyone would need a friggin cheeseburger when they have only been out of civilization for literally 25 hours. I don’t get it, I don’t get it, I don’t get it. I am still working hard on my ability to accept differences in others. Streek listens but

Mother Theresa

gets bored with my rant and looks to entertain himself. He brings 5 or 6 flat rocks out to the center of the swinging suspension bridge attempting to balance them in the center on top

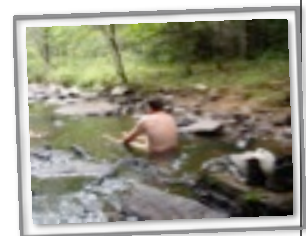


of one another. He succeeds and walks off gently. He comes over to me offering a challenge. “I will bet you one dollar your fat body can’t reach those rocks without shaking the bridge and knocking the rocks over.” I look at him and swear to myself. I am hiking with the biggest simpletons who ever hiked the Appalachian Trail.

Despite this realization, I can’t help myself and accept the challenge. Using all the subtlety I possess, this “husky” guy prances out on this shaking bridge and touches the rocks without a splash and earns a dollar. After about an hour, Giggles and Barfy return with 4 cheeseburgers, 4 sodas, 2 ice cream shakes and two bags of chips. The wimpy city slickers feast. Although I refuse to eat a cheeseburger, I could not resist the shake and drank half. I felt dirty, but it was good.



We gather up the gear once again and move on. The terrain is relatively flat for the next few miles. We pass Dismal Creek Falls Trail and notice a running stream with beautiful black shale scattered about. We stop and everyone takes off their shoes to refresh their feet. I never like to stop, especially after just wasting 1.5 hours on the cheeseburger diversion, but this was very soothing. Barfy elevates the moment and takes off everything. Before you know it he is sitting in the middle of this frigid creek in his birthday suit. Dismal Creek was so named due to the underlying black shale in the local geology. The black shale is extremely acidic, thus provides limited nutrients and creates poor soil



on which to grow productive crops. This is in contrast to Rich Valley where we started, which has a limestone base underlying the soil. The limestone provides good soil to grow crops. Consequently, in our trip along the AT, we have seen forested valley's without farms in one area and open farmed valleys in others. This is not random as these areas were blessed with different geologic assets.

We finally press forward to reach Wapiti Shelter. We arrive at the shelter by 5:30 pm, with enough daylight to retrieve water in Dismal Creek, find wood for a fire, and play Appalachian Horse Shoes. It was our second nice night on the trail in a row. Barfy says, "this camping in the wilderness stuff is pretty nice." Giggles tells him "See what you have been missing all these years collapsing in a heap at the end of a day."



Day Five - September 2, 2009 (16.2 miles)

Once again, last night was bitterly cold. Our bodies are more worn down than yesterday, especially the joints. Despite my whining, today promises to be a good day. We have 16.2 miles of Appalachian Trail to cover. At the end of today we will end up in the small town of Pearisburg, Va on the New River. We always have better days when we end up in a bed. Before I depart each day I need to tend to my blisters, lube up my feet with vaseline, put on my contact lenses, eat breakfast and re-stuff my backpack three times. Giggles looks at me and says, "you crack me up"; Streek goes a step further and tells me I am a spaz, and need a lesson in organization; Meanwhile, Barfy doesn't care if I put my boots on my hands or my pants over my head, he understands my oafish ways plus he has more important things on his mind like the pizza and pop he will be consuming in Pearisburg tonight. After a little more wrestling with my gear we all depart. Our prayer today is to acknowledge and accept that struggle is part of life. If we let the struggle overtake us we are doomed to failure. If we overcome this struggle, we will be better and stronger for the next obstacle we face.



At 8:15 am, we head northbound facing a formidable obstacle early today. We have a severe 1,400' climb in our first mile, which will severely test our lungs and legs even before our muscles are loose. After our initial climb, the trail levels off. We talk about the journey and marvel at how fast the week has gone by. The terrain becomes a little more rocky on the the mountain ridge we are traveling. We enter an open area and are treated to another picturesque valley below. This is God's country, however, we quickly return to the woods and the mundane dirt trail under our feet. Our next goal is

Doc's Knob Shelter. We walk for two hours without any signs or markers. In this stretch Streek twists a knee and Giggles' knee starts to swell. Everyone has quickly become frustrated with the trail and the fact that Doc's Knob Shelter is no where to be found. Everything is the same except our moods, which are slowly degrading. The hike is a test of physical and mental endurance. Adding to our test are the rocks we are stumbling over with increasing regularity. Walking on rocks is tolerable for a short while but after long periods of time your head wants to explode as you need to watch each and every step because one wrong step can snap an ankle or blow out a knee. We finally reach Doc's Knob. I collapse to the ground awkwardly. Barfy looks at me and laughs.

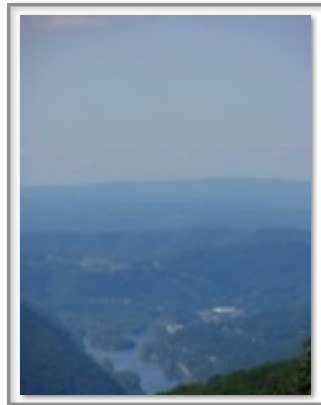
It is now the end of day five. Although I am beyond fatigued I am able to think with greater clarity (on the downhill). The outside distraction of my everyday life is finally fading from concern. I'm no longer worried about the little things and as I like to say the "static of life" has been removed. These moments are coveted. It is late in the day and we have traveled over 14 miles when we come upon Angels



“I am not concerned that you have fallen, I am concerned that you arise”

Abraham Lincoln

Rest. This site overlooks the town of Pearisburg, VA and the New River framed by the lush Appalachian Mountain Range. Angels Rest is a sandstone mountain ridge containing massive boulders piled on top of one another. These enormous rocks looked as if they were placed here by hand. The name “Angels Rest” comes from the shape of these rocks, which form an outline of an angel with wings. I think of my angel. I begin to remember with clarity a few moments I had with Julianna. I now vividly recollect a scene in the Atlantic Ocean where I am holding her by the hands and spinning round and round. She kept asking, “do again, do again.” Next, I flash back to a time I am holding her tight in a rocking chair. I attempting to put her back in her crib. She accepts lying in the crib for a brief moment then pops up and demands, “hold me, hold me.” I wish I had another hundred moments like these to remember. If I can share one thing with you...please take the time to make these moments with your loved ones. As dusk arrives we finish the last two miles of the day on our descent down to Pearisburg. I am the last hiker off the mountain savoring the last few moments with Julianna and a clear head.



Of course my three hiking buddies are practically sprinting to town with visions of pizza and sports center dancing in their heads. We made arrangements to stay at the Rendezvous Motel. When we arrive we meet the manager, a gentleman named Skeeter. You will note that we have interacted with three locals since our arrival five days ago. Their names are Homer, Bubba and Skeeter. You can't tell me Virginia is not part of the deep south.

Before Barfy lets his back pack hit the floor he is asking Skeeter for a ride to town to get pop and a wheel. Skeeter tells him, “I can't leave but your welcome to

take my car.” Barfy stunned at this act of kindness and trust is befuddled with his only comment, “can you imagine someone doing this in Philly?” Before the ride into town, the hiking team goes to take a shower. Skeeter and I talk. I tell him about our hike and the reason we are here. He listens attentively and gets a little misty eyed as I speak. He lets me finish and begins to tell me his difficult journey.



He was happily married with two children for many years when his life abruptly changed. His fourteen year old daughter was killed in a single car accident on a mountain road near Pearisburg. Shortly afterward his teenage son was in another accident. He nearly died several times and now needs full time care to survive. His wife could not handle this pain and literally lost it. She has succumbed to her grief living in solitude away from Skeeter and her son. After we spoke I could sense his sadness, but also saw a happy man. His joy in life came from helping others whenever he can...even four overweight hikers in need of a carbohydrate fix. My conversations with Skeeter where touching and unexpected. We were kindred spirits who have learned much about the important things in life the hard way. I am reminded of the comment a priest made to me after Julianna died, - “Your love gained will be greater than your love lost, if you let the love in.”



Day Six - September 3, 2009 (19.6 miles)

The four rugged outdoorsman ate pizza in a motel room while watching a baseball game last evening. Even though I dislike these sojourns into civilization, I must agree it is better than sleeping in the woods. I know, I know we are getting way too soft and I am letting it happen. We gather our gear and say our

goodbyes to Skeeter. The northbound journey begins down Main Street, Pearisburg. This town has seen better days. We cross the New River often called "the second oldest river in the world" dating as far back as 320 million years.

As we enter the woods, we hear the out of place sound of a cell phone ring. Barfy forgets to turn off his cell phone and answers the line: "Hello Ted, how you doing?" Barfy takes the call in stride just as he would on his commute to the office. He begins selling and trying to close a deal on a few tractor trailers he just received on the lot. I turn around and look at him with my, "what the freak are you doing?" stare. He blows me off and returns to the pitch. After he finishes deal I give him the business. He looks at me and says, "Hey I need to make money to fund this trip every year don't I?" I have no response to this very practical view.

We stop to pray. Our prayer today: "may all of our dreams come true. Each of us has strengths to pursue our dreams. The only thing preventing these dreams from coming reality will be the burden of self doubt."

The next sign we see indicates that we are 18.4 miles from the Pine Swamp Branch Shelter, our goal for this day. Barfy see this figure and laughs. I am not sure why. I would speculate that he did some quick self reflection and realized he has not walked 18 miles in one day in his entire life before this damn hike started seven years ago. Pearisburg, which we just departed, is located in a river valley on relatively low ground (1605'). Our first few miles of the day are generally flat. However, our next three require a 2,000' elevation. About halfway up this mountain we break. Barfy pulls a bottle of coke out of his backpack that he purchased in Pearisburg. Sitting on his backpack he stares at the bottle lustily, lick his chops and abruptly puts it back. More valuable than gold, he wants to hold this magic elixir for a more desperate moment. We march on, facing switchback after switchback, on the long ascent. The rocky terrain is maddening. At the next break, Barfy cannot hold out - the desperate moment has arrived. He opens the Coke slugging down half the bottle in one determined swig. He hands it around so each of us can partake. I am reminded of my high school years when we were passing around the bottle of Old Grand Dad I borrowed from my parents. We

begin the quest to the top again. We are hiking to the top of Peter's Mountain, which is providing a formidable challenge. Based on my balance of life beliefs, I think we are now experiencing a payback for our night of luxury last evening. At this point, I am not sure, if it is the pizza sitting in our bellies but the top of this particular mountain seems to be getting further and further away. After three hours of rigorous morning exercise we cross over a fence and enter a meadow. We are at the crest of Peter's Mountain. The peak is open and spectacular. It is true, the more we suffer the more we are rewarded. As we walk further into the clearance we are captivated by the imposing mountain ranges covering the entire western horizon. We have entered West Virginia, with the next several miles of trail straddling the state line between Virginia and West Virginia. After two miles of walking this ridge line we stop near the empty Rice Field Shelter, eat lunch and gaze over the state of West Virginia. We bask in the sunshine and savor this view.

After we finished lunch, we notice a figure in the distance emerge from the shelter. Considering a murderer is on the loose we remain vigilant. We give a hesitant welcome. His appearance is half hiker and half stalker. We make small talk about the weather or something. You can tell the man has an agenda. He further states he has been at this shelter for several days. Hikers don't stay in shelters for days, vagrants do. After a few awkward moments he makes his agenda known, which fortunately does not involve chopping us up into little pieces. This guy wants some money. He asks and we give no response. He now pushes his story. This guy needs the means to get to western union in a town some sixty miles away to retrieve a money transfer from his mother. He has a mom - thats good. As he speaks we assess this guy. His most notable trait is a single front tooth which protrudes forward. I think Streck, our trail



“Spread love wherever you go, first of all in your own house...let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier” Mother Theresa

dentist, couldn't even help this fellow. He continues with his plea gaining no sympathy from any of us. The first thought that comes to our mind: you are supposed to be hiking, why don't you get off your butt and hike the sixty miles to get your money. The guy had no credibility so we gear up and move on without giving him anything but a small treat. As we walk away I have regret we didn't help this guy. Even if he was full of crap and lazy, we could have acted more like Mother Theresa. I tell Barfy my feelings. He tells me to forget it. He expands thoughtfully, “by the way what was up with the can opener in his mouth?”



The next several miles are flat and rather lovely. We pass Syms Gap Meadow, an old orchard with many long forgotten trees still bearing fruit. After a few hours of walking we are now fifteen or so miles into our day. We stop to break when Barfy informs us he has run out of water. I offer him a sip. Before he accepts, he inquires whether it is cold. I had the urge, but not the energy to smack him in the back of the head.

I am thinking of our mileage goal today. I am an idiot. Trying to go 19.2 miles on our sixth day of hiking is foolish. At this point, we are completely drained and totally depleted. Giggles knee was bad and he began to hobble noticeably. At 6:30 pm we make our final mountain descent to Pine Swamp. The combination of the setting sun and the dense foliage in this dark valley makes our last steps particularly unwelcoming. At 7 pm we reach our shelter completely devoid of energy. Immediately, we are greeted at this shelter by a thru hiker named Strider. He is in his low 20's and looks to be in much better shape than the four of us. Introductions are made. We ask him, with our chest puffed out knowing we had a monster 19 + mile day, how far he hiked today? In a nonchalant matter of fact manner he tells us he went 25 miles. Are you frickin kidding me? We almost had four heart attacks going 19 miles. We better start training harder or I better find younger hikers. In fact, Strider was a speed hiker. He packs ultra light and has frequent drop offs along the trail to speed his journey. I did a little research on this speed hiking thing. The fastest speed hiker was a guy named Ward Leonard who did the entire AT in 60 days. That equates to 35 miles per day. Rumor has it he's a little crazy but arguably the best AT hiker of all time.



I think it is apropos that the best AT hiker of all time is an alleged “loon.” Based on the characters we have met to date on the trail this makes complete sense.

Strider was actually very normal. Each night he was writing a daily journal of his trip and posting it to a web site when he intersected civilization. Giggles obtained the link to Strider's journal. I read it and learned a few things. He is not only a far better hiker than me but he is also a far better writer. We all head to bed. In the darkness with all five of us are trying to sleep, Barfy, Giggles and Streek break into one of their silly rants laughing like drunk idiots. At this point I can only imagine what Strider will write about this group in his online journal. We head to bed in the cold Appalachian air.



Day Seven - September 4, 2009 (7.6 miles)

JUST BRUTAL!!! It was bitterly cold again last night. Based on the grumbling

from our team, I am quite certain next year's hike will demand an upgrade in sleeping bags, however, the cold does not put a chill in our spirits. In a few hours we will be completing our seventh year on the trail. A wonderful feeling of accomplishment permeates our camp. I even hear enthusiasm from Barfy when he implores, "lets get this crusty gear on and go hiking!" and "don't forget to stretch your leg muscles." The last day of hiking is always bittersweet. We are excited to get home but sad to leave the camaraderie we enjoy. We gather as a group for the final time and say our prayer. "Thank you Lord for this wonderful week and for our health. I

believe Julianna lives through each of us now...for her and for ourselves lets live fully, live lovingly and reach out to someone in need." AMEN.



At 7:10 am we depart for Salt Sulphur Turnpike and our 100 mile goal. It is so dang cool this morning we begin our hike wearing sweatshirts. The heavy lifting is behind us, we have a mere 7.6 miles to navigate on this last day. We begin our hike heading into Stoney Creek Valley, which offers relatively flat terrain for three miles or so. This leads us to our last major challenge of the week at Big Mountain where we have a 1,500' ascent. The climb, like many others this week, is difficult and draining. The climb is made more difficult by the onslaught of rocks in our path. We take it slow enjoying the crisp morning and our time together. After we crest Big Mountain we break. Streek offers up his personal feeling on the hike. "Starting tomorrow, I will look forward to the hike next year!" Giggles, who is

always good for a positive comment is relatively silent on this break. His knee is now completely worn out. Since he began our hike this morning he has walked with with a severe limp and not a giggle to be heard. We move on for our last few miles, which based on our map elevations, should be a flat stretch run to the finish line.



In our minds, we are done after that last hill. The Appalachian Trail has other ideas. It is saying goodbye to us in its own way, reminding us we better maintain our humility. We proceed forward on rock after rock... up hills and down hills. We are struggling in the extreme. Giggles is now in full hobble mode taking each step more gingerly than the step before. None of us anticipated the final harsh journey we are enduring. I think this struggle is fitting and, even though I hate the rocks, I covet these last miles on the trail.



102.3 MILES - RICH VALLEY TO SALT SULPHUR TURNPIKE, VA

Finally, after five hours of hiking, much of it over jagged rocks, we arrive at Salt Sulphur Turnpike greeted by Homer. We did it! We breached the 100 mile mark, traveling 102.3 miles in this wonderful and challenging week. Next year, we will begin at this same location, having a much different feeling about Salt Sulphur Turnpike when we return to the hike on August 28, 2010.

After our week in the woods, we return to Roanoke for our official weigh in. The results are startling. I figure me or Barfy would win hands down. I took the competition seriously as I was the only hiker to refrain from mass food and beverage consumption on the 80 minute return ride from Salt Sulphur Turnpike. But go figure - the skinniest guy in the group sheds twelve pounds and wins the weight loss honors.

The stats are as follows: Barfy started at 252 lbs and ends at 243 lbs; Jules starts at 242 lbs and ends at 233 lbs; Giggles starts at 216 lbs and ends at 214 lbs. Finally, the feather weight champion and winner - Streak weighs in at 202 lbs and ends at 190 lbs. Our cumulative weight is now 880 lbs down 32 lbs from our start seven days ago.

In all, we lose 32 pounds, gain some valuable life perspective and raise \$60,000 for worthy families...I can't think of a better way to spend a week.

Thank you all for your continued support.

