

## ILSE SCHELLER MERCIER

### Fourth of July on the trail

In 2001, I chose to do a thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail. Quite an adventure for a woman turning 46 with no real backpacking experience. It's an adventure I would encourage anyone of any age or gender to make.

That year, during the first week of hiking in Georgia, I met Stump, a southern lady wearing a pearl necklace.

July 4 found us hiking over Stoney Mountain in Pennsylvania, signing the register tucked into a mailbox in the middle of the woods at Yellow Springs. As we walked we reminisced about family traditions, where and how our loved ones were spending the Fourth, the food that would be served and that, next summer, we would be reminiscing about being in the woods with no real celebration, no family, no barbecue, no fireworks on the Fourth of 2001.

We stopped for a snack break and took up conversation with Ranger Rick, who was a section hiker from Ohio. He had written a book about the Philmont Boy Scout Camp in Arizona and was meeting the illustrator, Pete, who lived in Pennsylvania, for an overnight visit which meant a real meal, a shower and a real bed.

We said our goodbyes, wished him well on his luxurious accommodations for the night and continued hiking. When we got to the road-crossing, Pete was there waiting for a friend, whom he said was hiking the AT.

Putting two and two together, we asked if that would be Ranger Rick and, if it was, he was probably 10 minutes behind us. With that information Pete pulled out a conch shell and blew into it, the noise clearly resonating over the field and mountainside. He said Ranger Rick would know it was him.

As we visited a few more minutes, Ranger Rick joined us and Pete invited me and Stump to join them on the overnight visit. We looked at each other and never hesitated — remember the real meal, shower and real bed was quite an enticement. Off we went to Lebanon, Pa., to Pete's friends and enjoyed a pool party, pig roast, kegs of Yuengling, homemade ice cream, a parade with marching music and flags with all the grandchildren.

The funniest part was when we got to the party, Pete turned to Ranger Rick and said, "Introduce your friends." Ranger Rick looked at us and said, "I have no idea who they are. I just talked to them for five minutes during a snack break."

*Ilse Scheller Mercier lives in Livermore Falls. Her trail name is "Izzy."*

## CODY DEMILLO



Cody DeMillo on McAfee Knob in Virginia. This is one of the most photographed spots on the Appalachian Trail.

### Sore thighs and plenty of smiles

On March 27, 2011, my father dropped me off in Georgia and we both headed back to Maine. He was going back in a car and I was on foot.

The next two days my dad spent his time doing 75 mph on highways. During those same two days I walked in the woods, getting rained on.

All of the mental pictures I had of beautiful views and wildlife were replaced by fog, rain, trees and mud. Somehow, I couldn't wipe the smile off my face.

Over the next five-plus months the smile grew, along with my beard, and the sun came out. Being 26 years old and an avid hiker, I assumed that the trail would be much more of a mental challenge than a physical one.

Boy, was I wrong.

After a month of carrying my bulging backpack over what seemed like every mountain south of Virginia, my knees felt like they could explode at any moment.

Luckily, my thighs were so sore that I could hardly bend my throbbing knees, anyway.

Sometimes I think that the only thing

that kept me going was the friendship (and mutual physical pain) of two people I met on the trail. I hiked with them off and on for almost half of the 2,000-plus-mile trail.

One (named 4-Beard) was from South Georgia and the other (Fish Head) was from Michigan. They are like brothers to me now.

Summarizing my 2,181-mile hike and the time spent on the trail is next to impossible.

It's too long, too tough, and way too much fun to be able to truly explain it to someone clearly.

Most people I talk to about the trail nod their heads and say, "Oh, that sounds nice." They just don't get it.

To get it, you have to experience it. Standing on top of Katahdin in September, thinking back on all of the miles of trail, every time I set up my tent, all the laughs, all the blisters, all the small towns along the way, all the friends, all the beautiful views, and all the wildlife — I finally got it.

*Cody DeMillo lives in Jay. His trail name is "Coyote."*

## STEPHEN MARTELLI

### Return of the 'Grizzly Bear'

As a young boy, I read about the Appalachian Trail and dreamed what it would be like to hike it from end to end. The desire grew with every step I took on the trails in my neighborhood.

It was not until I hiked in the Delaware Water Gap area of New Jersey that the bug really set in. I was hiking with my friend Jeri and we camped out for the night at Sunfish Pond just off the AT. The next day, we were hiking back to the truck and my inner self wanted to go the other way and head up the trail toward Katahdin.

Over the next couple of decades I married, had children and worked hard. After my divorce, I moved to Maine in 1990 and was living in Kingfield and working at Sugarloaf.

It was there that I met two people, Ed and Kevin, who had hiked the AT. As our friendship grew, we talked about the trail more and more until, one day, I said that I was going to hike a large section of it myself.

My friends were happy and excited for me because it had been a long time since that first moment reading about it as a boy.

In March 1996 my hiking partner Kim and I headed off to Georgia to start the trek north. We finished our hike at 350 miles and a promise to start where we left off the next year.

Over the next few months Kim and I went our separate ways, but I still had this desire to hike.

So, in the spring of 1997, I headed back to Gatlinburg and started off from there and bagged 413 miles that year.

The spring of 1998 brought me closer to my goal of being able to stand on the "Big K." That year, I completed another 516 miles, but had to finish in Duncannon, Pa., because of injury.

By the spring of 1999 I had done my homework. This was the big year. I planned to hike the remaining 889 miles.

Duncannon was a welcome sight as I readied to head north. That first morning was cool and clear; a perfect day for a hike. I joined a couple of other hikers for breakfast and told them I was heading for Katahdin.

Two months later, I stood on Katahdin for the first time.

In 2006, my home burned to the ground and I lost everything. Part of that loss was 32 rolls of film taken on the trail. Now, only the memories are left.

It was the next summer when the thought of re-hiking the trail first came to mind. I could replace those pictures I lost.

In 2009, I slipped and fell, breaking my ankle. I figured my hiking days were over, but the doctor told me he was confident I would be hiking again.

During the first year of recuperation, with every step I had pain. My thoughts of re-hiking the trail were thrown to the wind.

A year later, I was walking around town every day and, after about half a mile, the pain would start in again. It was better than the previous year, and the idea of the trail got stronger with each passing day.

Now, three years later, I have no more pain when walking. My dream has come back to me stronger than ever, even though I am years older. The decision has been made. I am preparing for a hike on the trail.

The first thing to do is to get my feet measured and fitted for custom boots. Boots are the most important item needed on a long-distance hike. A poor fit has taken more hikers off the trail than any other problem.

I was fitted for Merrell boots at Lamey-Wellehan; it's like walking on air.

I will hike in the spring of 2014. I will take shorter hikes in preparation for the distance between Georgia and Maine.

And, when I get out there, I will re-take those pictures.

*Stephen J. Martelli lives in Auburn. His trail name is "Grizzly Bear."*

## DANA TOTMAN

### Embracing a social nexus

For many, 1974 will be remembered as the year Richard Nixon resigned the presidency or the year Hank Aaron broke Babe Ruth's record. For me, 1974 is the year I solo hiked the Appalachian Trail.

That hike and those mountains changed my life and continue to shape my life nearly 40 years later.

On March 26, 1974, while on break from college, I left my family's dairy farm in Topsham, traveled to Springer Mountain in Georgia and started my journey north along the AT. I left as a shy, insecure 20-year-old boy and returned four and a half months later an independent and confident young man.

In 1974 trail names, internal frame packs, Gore-Tex, cellphones, water filters and digital cameras didn't exist. I packed jeans, a chamois shirt, a wool sweater and cans of tuna, along with other essentials, into my stiff, beltless Kelty pack.

Predictably, my hike produced memories of a lifetime. I saw bears, copperhead snakes, wild boars and deer. I was joined in my tent by a hungry raccoon. I experienced temperatures from zero to 100. I was on the edge of a hurricane and a tornado. I had blisters, poison ivy and sunburn ... and a lot of fun.

What I remember the most are the people I met along the trail. Mostly, I teamed up with other college students, along with a few Vietnam vet-

erans who hiked to clear their heads.

I'd hike alone for a few days and then join the boys from Lake Forest College. Soon I'd join the girls from Hampshire College and then go it alone for a stretch.

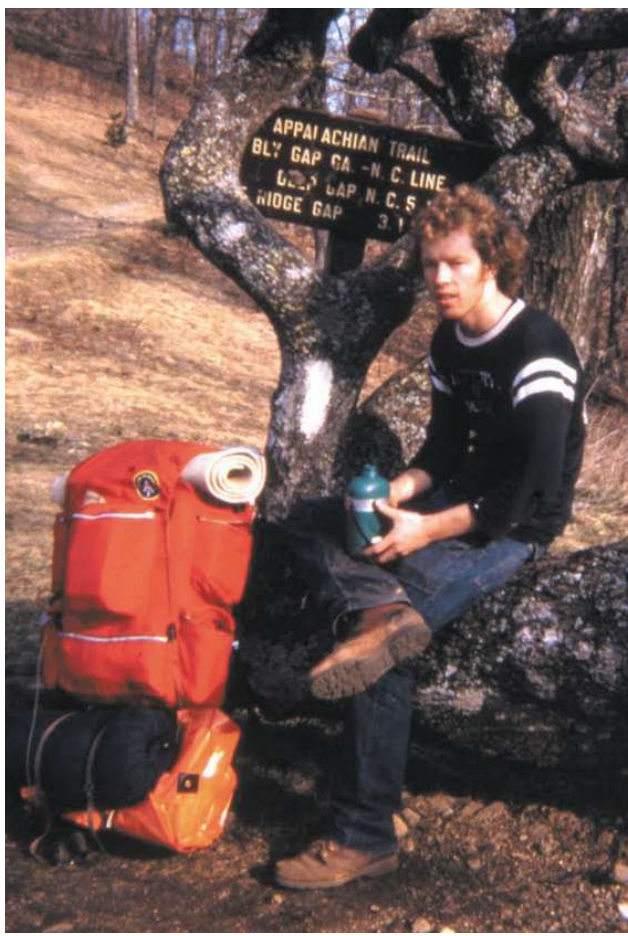
The girl from the University of Colorado and her friend from the University of Iowa would become hiking companions, followed by the UConn guy and the veterans. Then I'd return to my solitude.

With the other hikers, we told stories, challenged one another to hike farther and faster, or experimented with one more way of cooking dreaded noodles. We'd hitchhike down any random road looking for a store that sold a precious candy bar or ice cream. If we found a restaurant, we'd eat food and drink beer in record quantities.

In Vermont, I realized my pack and hiking boots were worn out. I hitchhiked back to Topsham, visited L.L. Bean and decided to complete the last leg heading south from Katahdin. This allowed me to enjoy brief reunions with the friends I'd met along the way. On Aug. 8, my 2,048-mile AT hike concluded in Bennington, Vt.

I returned home, completed college and introduced friends and my sons to hiking and climbing. Mountains have become my social nexus.

New Hampshire's 4,000-footers, half the Pacific Crest Trail, Kilimanjaro,



Dana Totman on his solo hike on the Appalachian Trail in 1974.

the Andes in Ecuador, Argentina and Peru are among my adventures over the years. On Aug. 19, 2012, I will join three old college friends to hike California's John Muir Trail.

In 1974, hiking mountains helped me mature.

In 2012, hiking mountains helps me stay young.

*Dana Totman lives in Brunswick.*

## MADELYN GIVEN

### Northbound in 2009

Hiking the Appalachian Trail became one of the greatest adventures of my life. At the time — in 2009 — it was simply putting one foot ahead of the other and concentrating on where every step was placed and never giving up.

One of the most memorable things about hiking the trail was the people I met. They were some of the best people I have ever been fortunate enough to encounter: helpful, kind and supportive.

By the time I came off the trail for a mail drop, or to resupply, I was quite a sight to encounter and to think people would give me a ride, take me out to dinner and make sure I had a room before they left me helped keep me going.

One very stormy night, I was invited by a judge to sleep on his front porch in a town on the Pennsylvania-Maryland border. His wife served me a great breakfast the next morning and the judge walked with me

awhile on the trail before saying goodbye.

I had trail magic and trail angels who gave me food.

One day, the liquid fuel for my stove leaked out of my little bottle and I had no way to cook supper. Nascar, who set up his tent near me, gave me a little fuel and I cooked under the flap of my tiny tent on that stormy night.

The next morning, when I packed up to leave at dawn, he stuck his head out of his tent and gave me a small bottle of fuel to get me through a few days, until I could reach a town to restock.

After this, Nascar hiked a week with me, but he hurt his leg and had to get off the trail.

I met Crank, a young guy from Texas, on my first day in Virginia (the longest part of the trail is Virginia; Maine is the second longest). Even though I was a solo woman hiker, I spent many days keeping pace with Crank.

I arrived in Harper's Ferry in exactly two months. It was my birthday. I was alone

and it was another rainy day. I was dripping wet when I walked into the AT Center to have my photo taken.

I found a room in the nearest motel to get cleaned up and, soon, Crank came along. He said he had hurried to catch up to me because he didn't want me to spend my birthday alone.

We went to the nearest place to eat, restocked and hit the trail again.

Those moments you remember. I had many, many people who helped me. I greatly respected the crews who maintain the trail, who would be out repairing the washouts and slides or damaged bridges as I passed. They were always cheerful and gave me a little history of the area.

Nature is amazing. Each part of the trail was different and exciting. Every day had its highs and lows. Every day I grew stronger. Every day was different.

Animals, weather, scenery, river crossings, mountain peaks, birds, flora and meeting people are all grand reasons to take a hike on this great trail.

*Madelyn K. Given lives in Poland. Her trail name is "Madelyn from Maine."*



Madelyn Given of Poland hikes over boulders in Pennsylvania in 2009.