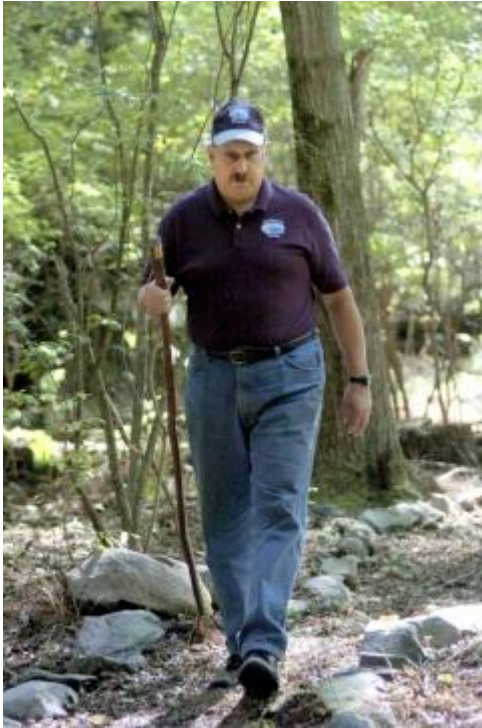


A life-changing injury heals with a new passion

BY KRISTEN GAYDOS (STAFF WRITER)



A broken neck and a pink tutu were the catalyst for Rich Evans' discovery of his passion for hiking and his involvement in the backpacking community.

The Mountain Top resident was living in Florida in the early 1990s when he suffered the injury that would change his life. He wouldn't have had the "good fortune" to discover his love of hiking if he hadn't fallen out of a bucket truck and broken his neck while working in Florida.

The accident forced Evans to give up the 70-hour work weeks he put in at the sign company he owned in exchange for four months of bed confinement. When watching television grew old after a few days, the then 38-year-old turned to reading.

Evans happened upon the book that would change his life: "A Walk Across America," Peter Jenkins tale of his 1970s hike from New York to the Gulf of Mexico.

"The whole book just lit of fire under me," Evans said, adding he soon began consuming any book he could get his hands on that related to hiking and the Appalachian Trail. "I just knew. I knew that was going to be a big part of my new life."

As soon as he was able to leave the bed behind, Evans purchased backpacking gear and hit the Florida trails for day hikes to build up endurance before tackling the trails up north.

He knew his first backpacking adventure had to take place on the famous Appalachian Trail.

Evans got his chance and spent three days on the trail, ending the days blistered and hobbling but "loving every second of it." He knew he had found his passion when he woke up in the middle of the night and saw the stars twinkling in the night sky.

"It looked like the stars were Christmas lights on the trees," Evans recalled. "It was this magical, spiritual welcome to the world of hiking."

The pink tutu came into play as Evans continued to research hiking and stumbled upon online message boards on the subject in the late 1990s. His introduction to a community made up of those just as passionate about hiking as he was "instant nirvana," he said. Soon he was a regular contributor and garnered attention when he joked about how unlikely it would be for him to wear a pink tutu while hiking.

"I made an offhand comment, I don't even remember the subject, that I would be as likely to do that as hike in a pink tutu," he said.

The joke took off from there and was frequently referenced during discussions. At a gathering in 1998, one of Evans' fellow enthusiasts presented him with a pink tutu. Embracing the joke, Evans wore the tutu over his clothes for part of the hike, although it was out-of-character for the normally reserved accountant.

"They basically said, we dare you to wear this today," Evans said. "I was the guy wearing the pink tutu that week."

Eventually, his notoriety among the hiking community, fueled by the pink tutu, led to Evans' appointment to the boards of the Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association and the Appalachian Trail Conservancy - a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving the trail.

As a certified public accountant, Evans is able to lend his financial expertise and help others who are just as passionate as he about wandering through the wilderness. Most recently, Evans was elected treasurer of the national board of directors for the Appalachian Trail Museum Society - the non-for-profit organization that established the Appalachian Trail Museum in South central Pennsylvania.

"It's all because I wore a pink tutu," he said.

The museum was converted from former 200-year-old grist mill in Pine Grove Furnace State Park near Gettysburg - at the midway point of the 2,178 mile Appalachian hiking trail that passes through 14 states from Maine to Georgia. It opened June 5 as the only museum in the United States dedicated to hiking.

Evans continues to hike, and although he hasn't completed the Appalachian trail, he travelled most of it in Pennsylvania and some points down south. He said a broken neck was a small price to pay for the chance to discover his passion in life. Furthermore, he became part of a community that produced lifelong friends.

"It's been a fantastic, fantastic adventure," he said.

For information on the Appalachian Trail Museum, visit www.atmuseum.org.

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