

How my journey to climb Mount Katahdin with my sister ended [column]

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There's a wooden sign at the start of the Hunt Trail on Maine's Mount Katahdin.

"You are entering Maine's largest wilderness," the sign read. "Your safety is your responsibility. Set a turnaround time and stick to it. Your destination is your safe return to the trailhead. Rescuers can be many hours in arriving."

Clear. Concise. Slightly ominous.

If you're just joining me, this is the third and final column in a [series about](#) hiking to the top of Mount Katahdin with my sister, Krystyna, who has multiple sclerosis. On Aug. 29, Krystyna, my brother-in-law and I embarked on the Hunt Trail. Part of the Appalachian Trail, the 5.2-mile path has an elevation gain of 4,188 feet to reach the peak at 5,269 feet.

The day started early. The gates at Baxter Park, where Mount Katahdin is located, open at 6 a.m. We had to check in with rangers who checked parking permits and took basic information about the car and how many of us were in it. At the start of the trail, we signed the check-in sheet hikers use to document when they are on the mountain and when they return. A little before 7 a.m., we were finally beginning the hike, passing the "Maine's largest wilderness" sign.

My brother-in-law, Jim, walked ahead. My sister and I stayed together the whole hike but did not talk much — not because we were mad, but because we were both focused on the hike.

The trail started off with terrain I am used to — dirt, rocks and a slight incline.

Somewhere in the first 2 miles, we had our only discussion on the mountain about multiple sclerosis.

“It’s like I wanted to do this to myself to prove that I still could after the last time, you know?” my sister said.

“Like after your last MS flare-up.”

“Yeah.”

Occasionally, I heard a stumble. When I asked if she was okay, she would say her foot dragged or “her leg was being dumb,” but that she was fine.

In 2007, Krystyna was diagnosed with MS, an autoimmune disease that affects the body’s central nervous system. When she was first diagnosed, she lost her ability to walk and talk. She could not grip items like utensils, and at one point, had to be put on a feeding tube. Krystyna was prescribed medication, regained all of the functions she had lost and was back in work in about three months.

Over the last few years, she has had her setbacks, including in 2021 when she had to change medications and lost some of her mobility and speech. She tries to stay active in her daily life.

The mountain

As we ascended the mountain, stair-like rocks began to double in size and then turned into boulders that required us to use our hands to get over. Eventually, those boulders became so frequent we were scrambling over more rocks than walking.

Around the 3-mile mark, and just before we climbed high enough to be above the treeline, we met a couple from Williamsport,

Lycoming County, Tim and Laurie. We finished the rest of the hike with them.

Above the treeline, we had to work our way over large portions of rock scrambles, places where you need your hands and feet to climb. Most of the rock scrambles had natural places to put your hands or feet to get yourself over them. When the rocks were too vertical and too high, there were bars or hooks drilled into the rock face to pull yourself up with.

A lot of this section was difficult for someone who is about 5 feet, 3 inches tall. I was extremely grateful for my brother-in-law, Jim, reaching a hand down to me, and Tim giving me a boost by letting me use his hands like a step stool.

I have a friend that used to tell me when I felt like I was climbing a mountain to look at my feet and trust each step was getting me there. She was talking about metaphorical mountains, but the advice was in my head as we made our way up Mount Katahdin.

The top of the rock scrambles led to a ridge, followed by another set of rock scrambles then to a flat plateau. Here, sections were roped off to protect the fragile alpine ecosystem. I found out a day later that the arctic Katahdin butterfly is only at the top of Mount Katahdin.

Then, we climbed our last hill and reached the peak.

We did not talk other than to say “we did it.” We took a photo. Then, we just sat on the rocks with about 20 other hikers looking out at the landscape. The day was clear and allowed for a view of the forest that extended until it got lost in the horizon. Mountains and lakes were the only features that broke up the long stretch of green.

We eventually agreed it was time to leave. Tim and Laurie took a different route down and we returned to the Hunt Trail.

My legs were fatigued from going up. Going down hurt. I understand why people say, "Going up is optional. Coming down is mandatory." To get down the large boulders, there was no other way but to slide down them. Other rocks required upper body strength to lower myself down. Jim went first, guiding us and, when needed, would guide my foot to the right edge when I had to reach blindly.

When we got back to the car and pulled away, my sister said, "Now you can say you accomplished something really hard."

Yeah. I was sunburned, my shins were bruised, and my muscles were sore — but I was happy.