



Kindness on the Appalachian Trail

TRAIL ANGELS & SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY

By Katrina M. Randall

When Bob Gabrielsen was 15 back in 1977, he set out to hike the Appalachian Trail with a few older kids.

While he eventually found himself abandoned by them on the trail, a benevolent hiker he met gave him food, means to survival, and gifted him with a pay it forward sentiment that he's emulated as an adult.

There's a lot of paying it forward on the Appalachian Trail, at least in the southern region where southern hospitality charm continues to be a boon to bedraggled hikers. Gabrielsen, who opened the Top of Georgia Hostel and Hiking Center in March 2014, did so because he said there wasn't really a place near the top of the state for hikers needing telephone service, equipment, or a drive to a restaurant.

By the time those attempting to thru-hike the entire trail get to his hostel in Hiawassee, Georgia, they're often dirty, tired, and have underestimated the intensity of the trek.

This is no surprise when they've been hiking for days, tirelessly trekking forward through the rugged peaks and valleys of nature at the whim of weather and the body's physical limitations. Often, they've packed their bags too heavy and are anxious from hearing outlandish rumors about the trail they've either read online or heard through word of mouth, noted Gabrielsen. "A lot of them have been hiking for days and not sleeping because they think bears are hanging out in trees waiting to attack them. And they're holding their pee in all night, eating dehydrated food, and they're constipated," he said.

Running from Maine to Georgia, the Appalachian Trail is around 2,190 miles. According to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, each year roughly two to three million people hike a portion of the trail, while a smaller percentage hike the entire trail and become a "2,000-miler." The Conservancy has recorded more than 17,500 hike completions since 1936. Of the thousands that attempt to hike the entire trail every year, only about one in four make it all the way.

Yet, despite the hardships from embarking on such an adventure, it is exactly this and the community on the trail that has transformed so many who have called the AT their temporary home. "You have to be very independent minded and kind of stubborn and say I'm going to do this anyway. So those people are really free spirits, real independent people. The world out here is an amazing brotherhood, people share everything," said Gabrielsen, who has been dubbed a "trail angel," much like the man who once helped him.

Trail angels are people who help hikers when they come out of the woods. According to Maranda Stone, a writer with Montefino and a 2,000-miler, a trail angel can be anyone who leaves snacks or water at a trailhead, gives a hiker a free ride, or just does anything that helps hikers. "Miss Janet is a trail angel who drives up and down the trail

every single year, giving hikers free rides, advice, and anything else they need. Odie takes pictures of hikers and makes the Hiker Yearbook every year to reconnect trail friends," she said. "We experienced so much generosity and trail magic on our journey." Whether it was a taco bar in Tennessee just off the trail, rides into town, free invites to sleep at strangers' houses, coolers of popsicles, the spirit of kindness is strong on the trail.

For Nancy Hoch and her late husband, Jeff, it was the relationships and caring between people that made them decide to turn the Fontana Motel into the Hike-Inn, a hiker-only establishment in Fontana Dam, North Carolina. According to Hoch, she and Jeff didn't know anything about the trail until he picked up some hikers in need of lodging and clean clothes and opened their motel to them. The couple was taken with how diverse and close the group was, inspiring them to change their business to serve hikers, which has been running this way now for 25 years.

Like Gabrielsen, Hoch noted that many people coming off the trail go in underprepared, but the relationships built are lifelong. "It's a really fascinating life," she said. "Just the people you meet on the trail, because they come from all walks of life." Indeed, over the years Hoch has hosted guests from across the globe, including Tanzania, Fiji, Japan, Australia, Germany, and Great Britain. And she hears it quite often that hikers coming through the Southern Appalachian Mountains are overwhelmed by the hospitality of the area.

Whether hiking the trail or playing host or angel to adventurers, the Appalachian Trail has changed the lives of many who have embraced the lifestyle and community. Take the sweet corporate raider Gabrielsen met, who, after leaving the trail, went on to join the Peace Corps.

"Some people get stuck on the trail," Gabrielsen noted. "I never got off. It can be quite amazing. It's also renewed my faith in the human spirit, to see how people help each other out." —