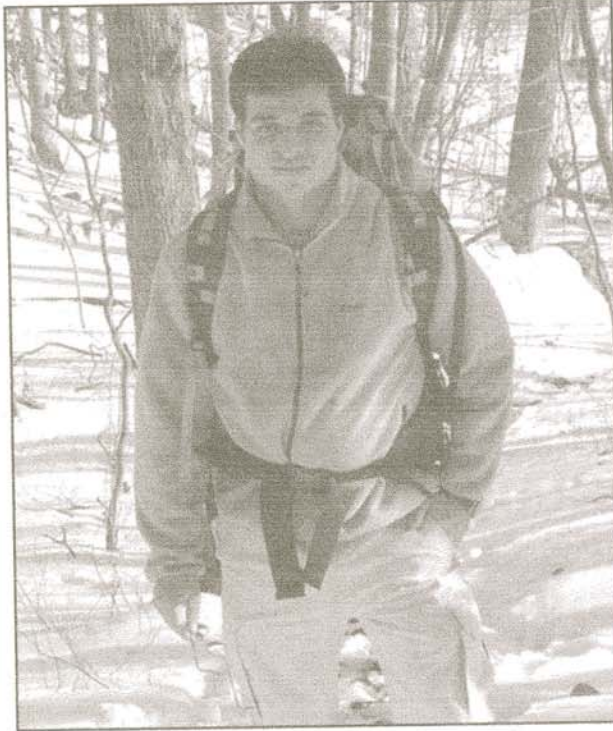


Local Man Hikes Appalachian Trail for AIDS Awareness

BY KATHY WELSH

Twenty-two year old Jesse Saperstein, a graduate of Hobart and William Smith College, Arlington High School and a resident of Pleasant Valley, will hike the Appalachian Trail – a hike that will take him six months to complete – to bring awareness to the public about the seriousness of the AIDS pandemic worldwide. His trek began on March 9, 2005 and Jesse plans to complete the entire trail from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Mount Katahin, Maine – a 2160 mile journey for The Joey DiPaolo AIDS Foundation (JDAF). Jesse will keep an Internet journal (www.HikeForAids.org) for all to see and hopes to view e-mails of support throughout his journey.



Joey DiPaolo, said Jesse, contracted AIDS after undergoing open heart surgery on May 23, 1984 at the age of four. During the surgery Joey was transfused with HIV contaminated blood and became infected with the virus. DiPaolo was diagnosed with AIDS in 1988. DiPaolo has been involved in AIDS education since he went public with his disease in September 1990 and plans to continue to bring his message to students of all ages for as long as needed.

"This hike is kind of a metaphor," said Jesse, "for those who battle each day with HIV/AIDS." The long winding trail with its up hills and down hills, the basic struggle of survival associated with a long-term hike, he said, are a symbol of every day life for those who suffer with the disease.

During Jesse's senior year of college, he served as a residential advisor to the AIDS Awareness House. His decision to actively bring attention to the AIDS epidemic began after learning about Joey DiPaolo through an HBO special called "Blood Brothers: The Joey DiPaolo Story." Jesse has embraced this cause after meeting Joey DiPaolo and after volunteering for Camp TLC (Teens Living a Challenge). The camp is a residential summer camp program for teens between the ages of 13-19 living with HIV/AIDS.

Jesse stated, "I volunteered at Camp TLC the week of August 14-21, 2004. It really opened my eyes to the reality of

AIDS. One of the most profound things I heard that week came from a fellow counselor. She said, 'People say that AIDS does not discriminate, but it is a lie.' At the camp, 98 percent of the campers were African American and all of them contracted the HIV virus from their mothers at birth." Jesse admits that before he became involved with the foundation, there were some things he was ignorant about the AIDS epidemic. "Whenever I would hear about a man who had AIDS, the knee-jerk question which would enter my mind was, 'Is he gay? Is that why he has AIDS?' Before volunteering at the camp, I was expecting at least a small percentage of the campers to have contracted the HIV virus through high-risk behaviors such as unpro-

tected sex and drug usage (considering the oldest campers are young adults). That was hardly the case and I also did not realize how much the African American population is affected."

Jesse was also motivated by the fact that Americans are under the grave misassumption that AIDS is no longer a life-threatening illness due to the advances in medications. It is this ignorance, stated Jesse, which is increasing the spread of AIDS instead of eradicating it through prevention.

This entire endeavor is a huge investment, stated Jesse, who worked the night shift at IBM and was a substitute teacher in the Arlington Central School District, to pay for fund-raising costs and hiking equipment. Currently most of Jesse's fund-raising has been accomplished by mailing out hundreds of letters (most of them directed towards people connected with his alma mater, Hobart and William Smith Colleges). "The returns so far have amounted to over \$2000. This figure is rather disappointing considering my original goal was \$100,000. My hope is the media will play an invaluable role in promoting the fund-raiser right before and during the months I am hiking."

He adds, "I feel there are two factors impeding the success of this fund-raiser, which happen to be out of my control. When a person receives solicitation in the mail they are likely