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Local man to hike for AIDS group

Saperstein readies for trail hike with a cause

By Pete Colaizzo
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Jesse Saperstein knows. He knows the odds of his walking the entire length of the Appalachian Trail are stacked against him. He knows his hiking experience is woefully inadequate for the task at hand.

Janis and Lewis Saperstein know. They know their son's proposed endeavor -- walking the entire, 2,160-mile length of the trail from Georgia to Maine this spring and summer -- is fraught with potential pitfalls. They know their son has a much better chance of landing a job or pursuing a masters degree than completing this grueling walk in the wilderness.



Lee Ferris
Jesse Saperstein shows off his hiking gear.

But there is more to this story than an improbable hike by a young man who admitted that, until a few years ago, his "roughing it" experience consisted of camping out in the backyard of his grandparents' home in Millerton. There's more to it than a recent college graduate who, on practice hikes along the well-marked AT, has gotten terrifyingly lost in the woods -- while still in Dutchess County!

Jesse Saperstein knows. He knows that he has a better chance of graduating from medical school or law school than completing his AT hike. But he's going to give it a go, anyway, because he won't be alone out there in the woods.

For Saperstein, a 2000 graduate of Arlington High School and a Pleasant Valley resident, this hike is about far more than personal achievement. His goals transcend simply avoiding blisters and bears, not getting lost and making sure his backpack is not weighed down with unnecessary junk.

No sir. Saperstein wants to finish his hike. But more than that, he wants to

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educate and enlighten people along the way about AIDS. His hike will be a fundraiser for the Joey DiPaolo AIDS Foundation. His goal is to raise \$100,000 for the foundation, which is named after a young man who has been HIV positive for years and who has helped raise awareness of the disease through his upbeat message and positive work for the cause.

Saperstein graduated in 2004 from Hobart and William Smith Colleges with degree in English and a minor in peer education. He has devoted his first post-college year to the hike and all its attendant needs.

-- He sent out letters to every member of his 2004 college graduating class. At one point last summer, the dining room table at his Pleasant Valley home was smothered by envelopes, letters and stamps.

-- He has invested in as much hiking equipment he will need along the way. He has become friendly with employees at the Eastern Mountain Sports store in Poughkeepsie, where he has purchased much of the equipment and received much friendly advice.

-- He has reached out to local and national media to tell his story, and the story of the Joey DiPaolo Foundation.

- He has dutifully researched every aspect of his AT adventure. He knows how much food to bring, which mail drops he will use and how much weight he wants to carry on his back. He has even linked up with two potential hiking partners online.

During his research, Saperstein learned that a whopping 20 percent of potential AT through-hikers call it quits after a scant two weeks. More than anything else, Jesse Saperstein does not want to become such a statistic.

Saperstein said he hopes his hike will be a way to depict the struggle so many people afflicted with HIV/AIDS have to go through every day.

"The constant walking uphill and downhill almost every day should serve as a metaphor for the relentless battle one has to face with HIV/AIDS," he said. "It is extremely difficult to imagine quitting over anything other than a serious injury."

Saperstein's family is supportive -- if not mildly concerned -- with his hike, which is scheduled to begin at Springer Mountain, Ga., on March 9. His mom, Janis, has helped with the mounds of paperwork Jesse has created in his fundraising and publicity efforts.

But being a mom, Janis Saperstein also has concerns about the mammoth task at hand for her son.

"I'm nervous about it, sure," Janis Saperstein said. "But my husband and I are supporting him. This is what he wants to do. For Jesse, this is his passion right now."

Indeed it is.

When Jesse Saperstein takes his first step on the AT, he will have prepared to the best of his ability. Included in that have been several practice hikes on local sections of the AT. Most recently, he hiked a 26-mile stretch from Poughquag in Dutchess County to Kent, Conn.

Practice makes perfect?

He also tried a few practice walks from his Pleasant Valley home to Millerton, where his father Lewis owns and operates Saperstein's -- a store that has been a centerpiece in the village for nearly 60 years. It took him four tries before Jesse was able to complete the 29-mile journey through the Harlem Valley.

Along the way, he learned valuable lessons on how much to keep in his backpack. With all his practice hikes, he also realized what a difficult task he has ahead of him. All of which is not lost on his father.

"I tried to talk him out of it," Lewis Saperstein said. "It's such an undertaking. It's scary. The trail is more than 2,100 miles, through mountains and scrambling up rocks. But once he sets his mind to something, that's it. When I realized he wasn't going to change his mind, I was supportive. He has great aspirations, and it's very noble what he's trying to do."

Saperstein said his three main goals with the hike are as follows: 1. To finish; 2. To show others that if they badly want to achieve a goal, they can; 3. To raise funds and awareness for HIV/AIDS.

Saperstein said he realizes he is taking many chances with his proposed hike. But when explaining his motivation, he likes to summon one of his favorite quotes from Michael Jordan: "You miss 100 percent of all shots you don't take."

Said Saperstein: "I have no right to definitely say I'm going to finish. But after all this work, I'm going to do my best to go as far as I can with it."

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'Stop AIDS Dead in its Tracks'

For more information about Jesse Saperstein's Appalachian Trail hike, contact him directly at 845-325-6152 or by e-mail at SCI FY1903@aol.com. Send donations to: The Joey DiPaolo AIDS Foundation, 108 Vineland Ave., Staten Island, N.Y. 10312. The foundation's telephone number is 718-967-5609, and e-mail address is joeyaids@aol.com

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