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Saperstein enlightened by hike on Appalachian Trail

By Nancy Haggerty

For the Poughkeepsie Journal

So many steps. So many memories.

And this, Jesse Saperstein knows, is only chapter one.

Already there are numerous characters, among them his two original hiking partners, who took off separately within the first four days, and his new hiking partner, who, defying traditional hiker sense, hauls weighty fruits and vegetables with him... He's called Chef Boyardee.

In fact, seemingly everyone on the Appalachian Trail -- at least the thru-hikers -- gets a nickname.

There's Creaky Bones, a 65-year-old woman, who plans to hike the trail's length -- Georgia to Maine -- raising money for a church project.

There's the Lion King, 36, who has hiked the whole trail four times.

And there's 69-year-old Echo, who essentially lives on the trail and has hiked its length seven times.

Then there's Saperstein, who's soaking all of this in.

He has been hiking since March 9. Best case scenario he'll reach trail's end in August. Worst case scenario he, like the majority of folks who plan to go the distance, will get off beforehand.

The trail isn't for everybody; actually, the fact it's for anybody is perplexing.

Rain, snow, climbing, climbing, climbing, looking for water, blisters, heat, humidity and exhaustion lead to the repeating question, Why go on?

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But Saperstein is either buoyed or pushed along by a promise. The Pleasant Valley resident has already secured more than \$10,000 in donations for the Joey DiPaolo AIDS Foundation and ultimately wants his hike to raise \$100,000 for it.

But to do so the 2004 Hobart and William Smith Colleges graduate, who'll turn 23 Saturday, must keep walking.

Last Monday, he passed 100 miles, a blip considering the trail's 2,160-mile length. But, motivationally, it's important to acknowledge every achievement, Saperstein says.

He learned that quickly. He's learning a lot, in fact, about himself and others. "Enlightening" is the word he settles on when asked for a quick description of his experiences.

"The trail completely reminds me of Hogwarts. It's a different world," Saperstein said Tuesday from Franklin, N.C.

"Some people work for this day for years. This is fulfilling their dreams," he said, noting 60-year-old-plus thru-hikers are common.

Others with "excess baggage" use the trail to escape.

Of Echo, for instance, Saperstein said, "He's the type of person who has experienced a lot of blows in life and the trail gives him peace of mind... Someone who has hiked the trail seven times may not be respected in the real world but here he's a legend."

"It's beyond my comprehension to do it more than once," he adds.

Snows on first night

His first day hiking, Saperstein planned to go well past the trail's eight-mile approach route before breaking for the night. Instead, he stopped at the trailhead, exhausted. As snow fell, he was kept awake as much by voices of self-doubt as by a fellow hiker's relentless snoring.

"The first night was kind of a living hell for me... I was rather disheartened to do only eight and be so tired and I had to accept that this was my life for six whole months," he said... "I was freaking out... I was close to tears... It was a very hard wakeup call."

But things have improved.

He has twice stowed his energy bars and dehydrated food, diving into snacks and meals supplied by "trail angels," who show up here and there simply to sweeten a hiker's day.

Trail magic, Saperstein calls their appearance.

And, indeed, the so-often-menacing trail can be magical. One day on a fog-

shrouded mountain, ice slipped from trees, appearing to Saperstein much like cascading rose petals.

There are also moments of amusement. He laughs at his hiking partner's ill-fated attempt to hitch a ride on a bus carrying convicts, and at his own trail name -- LoJack -- which stems from his mother convincing him to carry a beacon locator device.

"In case I was about to die, a helicopter could come for search and rescue. I don't know how they'd get down through the trees but at least they'd know where my dying body was," Saperstein said, laughing.

Tired of its weight and other hikers' comments, Saperstein shipped the locator home on day four, when he had access to mail service.

The trail name it spawned, though, endures, as does Saperstein's DiPaolo Foundation commitment, an outgrowth of his work as a resident assistant at his college's AIDS awareness theme house.

He's in this for the long haul; he's sure of that. Now logging about 12 miles a day, hiking 8:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m., he's looking forward to adding mileage as daylight hours increase.

He knows countless ups and downs -- psychological, as well as geographical -- lie ahead.

But that's part of the appeal.

"You don't know what to expect," Saperstein said. "It's definitely an adventure every day."

Nancy Haggerty's Without Limits column appears each Sunday in the Poughkeepsie Journal.

On the Web

More about Jesse Saperstein's hike and fundraising effort, including information about the Joey DiPaolo AIDS Foundation, can be found at www.hikeforAIDS.org

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