

Pleasant Valley's Saperstein hikes for worthy cause

One thousand, three-hundred eighty-eight and eight-tenths miles later, and the Poughkeepsie Galleria, a mocha cooler shake and Charlie and the Chocolate Factory were beckoning.

NANCY HAGGERTY



WITHOUT LIMITS

Life's little rewards ... Jesse Saperstein hasn't had many lately.

He spent his 23rd birthday in April, for instance, snowbound in a Smoky Mountains shelter.

On a seemingly endless journey up and down wooded mountains, that's the most down moment. Claustrophobic, bored and miserable, there he was belting out "I'm walking on sunshine..."

But on a recent Saturday, Saper-

stein finally wasn't walking.

Seven-hundred eighty-six and one-tenth miles to go, he exited the Appalachian Trail at Bear Mountain for a short break and was finally home in Pleasant Valley.

Saperstein has spent the past four-and-a-half months hiking the trail to benefit the Joey DiPaolo AIDS Foundation. He has raised nearly \$20,000, still hoping for \$100,000 before his likely September finish on Maine's Mount Katahdin.

Through rashes, chafing and service as blood bank to countless ravenous insects, he plows on.

"I like to think I'm the type of person who sticks with a commitment," he said. "But I think the Foundation keeps me going... It's extremely hard to imagine quitting."

The Foundation runs Camp TLC (Teens Living a Challenge) for kids who, with either AIDS or HIV, wish their biggest problem was walking 2,174 miles. Saperstein volunteered there last summer after graduating from Hobart and

On the Web

Information about the Joey DiPaolo AIDS Foundation and Jesse Saperstein's fundraising hike can be found at www.hikeforaids.org

William Smith Colleges.

He worked 12-hour night shifts at IBM and subbed at Arlington High — he's a 2000 grad — to finance the hike.

He's buoyed by the support of those familiar — friends, the DiPaolos, Arlington High staffers, and family — and those not so familiar, including an elderly Hobart alum, who wrote, explaining a relative has AIDS.

"We must work to stop the anguish and broken hearts," the man concluded.

Inspired, Saperstein's mother, Janis, designed a golden broken heart locket looped with a red crystal AIDS ribbon.

It's one of the ways his family's

with him in his effort.

And thru-hiking is quite the effort. It's a life with too many trail bars, too much instant oatmeal, and too few nights in a motel or real meals.

Months later, he's still irked by a woman who remarked of his fundraising, "So, you don't want to work yet, huh?"

"This isn't a vacation; it's work," said Saperstein. "This is the hardest, most relentless thing I've ever done ... I wasn't prepared for how slow the mileage would go."

Lost six partners

He also wasn't prepared for losing six hiking partners — including his initial two the first week and one after three months. The most recent left from his house after three weeks together. That partner, Jocelyn Scholer, 44, decided she'll finish the "last American Adventure" at another time.

Despite her having days when, "If a taxi pulled up, I'd jump in," she motivated Saperstein, often ris-

ing earlier and hiking faster.

"I think we made a pretty good team. She made me try harder to keep up with her," he said, pointing positively to 14-plus miles days.

Resigned to her departure, he said, "The sooner you make friends with disappointment and change, the easier the time you will have."

Of the hike in general, he said, "It's frustrating. You're always leaving, always saying goodbye."

But he's also always encountering interesting people — people who inspire, like the couple, who, after losing their jobs, are thru-hiking with their kids, 14, 13 and 10; and people who amuse, like the guy who carried a 15-pound bike more than 700 miles, explaining he needed assurance if he decided to go home he could.

Saperstein, meanwhile, isn't going anywhere but to the trail's end.

His shorts caused such bad chafing (enough "torture" that he left the trail and lay in a Virginia hotel bed for a day and a half with the



Saperstein

air conditioner blasting) that he now wears a kilt.

"I was a desperate man in desperate circumstances," Saperstein said of the purchase, smiling.

Desperate but dedicated.

"Obsession," he said, "is not pretty or healthy thing to live with but in many cases it's the only way to get through a major challenge."

Nancy Haggerty's *Without Limits* column appears Sundays in the *Poughkeepsie Journal*.