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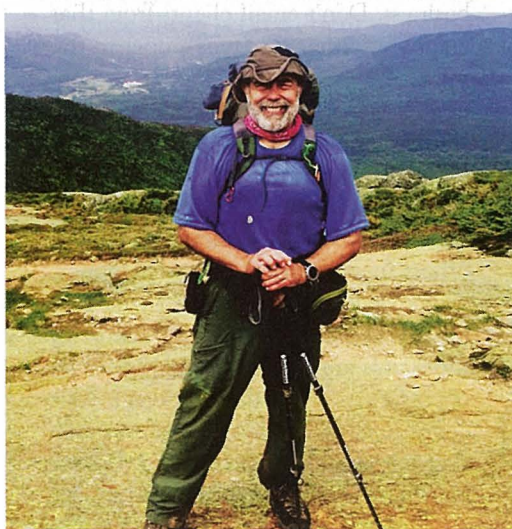
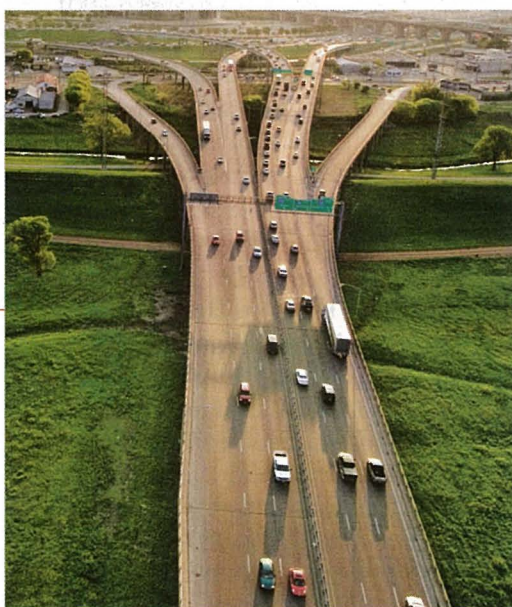
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One Step at a Time

A Dallas attorney's 700-mile hike pushes his body and frees his mind.

INTERVIEW BY LINDSAY STAFFORD MADER

On April 1, 2015, early in the morning, 64-year-old Dallas attorney Mike Lynn found himself in northern Georgia, setting off on foot with a 34-pound bag strapped to his back. He was heading for Springer Mountain trailhead, the southernmost point of the Appalachian Trail that marks the end of the road for some who have already been on the path for days, weeks, or months. But for Lynn and many other “thru-hikers” hoping to eventually cross all or a portion of the AT’s 2,000-plus miles and 14 states—it was just the beginning.

On Lynn’s first day, the rocky trail through the Blue Ridge Mountains was lively, with the sun shining gently, the air crisp, and throngs of hikers fresh with excitement. Lynn, a respected and busy litigator, did much better than he had expected to do on the gradual but constant ascent to Springer’s summit. But the next day, rain and heavy fog arrived and dampened hikers’ moods as they packed up their

tents and gear and tried to carry on sopping wet.

The terrain and weather were often rough and unforgiving as Lynn forged ahead, shedding pounds from his bag and his body and hiking almost 700 miles of the AT in about three months. Like most other hikers, he took on a trail name: TinMan, because of his double knee replacements. Along the way Lynn experienced intense pain and injuries as well as moments of joy and peace, and he chronicled this journey on a blog that has gotten more than 22,000 hits.

Back home and back to work for a year now, Lynn guesses that he decided to hike the AT because he wanted to challenge himself or attempt to race the march of time. But, after sorting through several explanations, he admits that he will likely never know why. As Lynn wrote on his blog the night before flying to Georgia: “I guess one must leave what one has become to figure out who one is.”

Dallas attorney Mike Lynn hikes up Mount Washington, the highest peak east of the Mississippi River and north of the Carolinas.

Did your preparation of researching for hours, buying the best gear, and weighing your pack's contents make a difference?

I could not have gone as far as I did had I not understood what I was getting into. The trail hikes you, not the other way around. It is relentless and unforgiving, and I knew that I could not make mistakes. Before I left I learned to pack light and take care of my feet. I learned to hike my own hike and not be embarrassed by the short distances in the beginning. I learned to stay warm when wet (yea, merino wool), and I loved my insect shield buff, which protected my neck and head.

Did being in nature with so few necessities change your relationship with material possessions?

In a counterintuitive way, a hiker on the AT is more materialistic than he or she was before the hike. Nothing can be lost. All the things you own keep you alive and well. Your water purification is critical, so too are your sock liners, food, shelter, and fuel. But, because what you have you carry up and down the mountains, you always ask yourself, Do I really need this thing?



The Appalachian Trail on Blue Mountain in Georgia.

Describe the solitude you experienced. I never really felt alone. I was always solving hundreds of problems each minute, such as: Is the pain in my back because my pack is unbalanced and should I take the time to repack? Where did others who came before me plant their poles, which will tell me which side of the boulder wall they decided to climb first? Where is the next water source? Have I seen a "white blaze" (the two-by-four-inch white rectangle on trees and rocks about every mile or so that lets you know you are on the trail)?

There were times when I would look up and see beauty or lie down and nap or wonder how did I deserve such a wonderful experience such as this. I liked listening to the breeze and the tree limbs creaking. I liked listening to the water gurgle. I even enjoyed composing my blog during the day as I walked.

What was one of the most challenging aspects or moments of the hike?

I'll share a passage from my blog, written after I hiked 4,500-foot Garfield Mountain in New Hampshire: "This morning I had to climb down a waterfall. My boots and hands slipped repeatedly and my hands became numb from the cold water cascading over them. My arms strained to hold onto small handholds on rocks or roots. My pack became soaked and the weight on my shoulder straps caused them to cut into my shoulders. One arm began to tingle. Falling, however, was not an option. In the end I made it down. Tired and satisfied that God let me live and without anything broken. [The trail is] too vast, and my

energy is so puny compared to it. Survival and a sense of thankfulness is overwhelmingly my primary feeling."

Did you learn why some of the others were hiking the AT?

Some are running from something that happened to them—a death, a divorce, combat in Iraq or other places—and some are simply trying to figure out which college to go to. Almost everyone is turning a chapter and needs or wants time away from the so-called "real" world to think and reflect.

Did you come home with any regrets?

No serious ones. I had planned to hike 1,000 miles, but I pushed myself beyond what I physically could do and I feel comfortable that I could do no more. I made it up almost to the final climb on Mount Katahdin in Maine and could have pushed to the top had I been less injured. I will return and finish that part of the trip someday.

What stuck out to you as the strangest part of returning to "civilized" life?

Having water at the dinner table that is pure. Driving in a few minutes more than I could walk in a day. Looking over a large breakfast spread at a restaurant. The speed of the day. CNN. The lack of exertion. The fact I cannot hear my breath. No longer being able to smell tiny changes in things around me. The conflict. How soft my granddaughter is. Hot showers.

What were some of the most lasting things you learned from hiking the AT?

From another blog post: "I learned that the challenge was fun and, while difficult, surmounting it gave me enormous satisfaction. I learned that people are good and decent and generally will help one another. I learned that I could master new skills and take care of myself so long as I remained calm. I learned again that giving up was mental. I saw a part of the country I never would have seen but for my journey. I don't think I will ever drive by a forest or look at a ridgeline the same way. I learned that even as old as I am, I can adapt to a new and somewhat harsh life. I'm tougher than I was and hopefully a good deal more patient."

Why do you still think about the AT?

I miss the struggle, the friends, the beauty, the solitude, the hunger, the cold, the heat, the glory, and, of course, the failure of the journey. I miss it because I am TinMan and I don't have a choice; I am always moving toward death but enjoy the life I am permitted to experience now. **TBJ**

For more of Lynn's blog posts and photos from hiking the Appalachian Trail, go to tinmanonat.blogspot.com.