

Pass It On®...

A Tradition of Kindness on the Appalachian Trail

The Appalachian Trail is a rugged footpath that runs from Northern Georgia to Central Maine along the crest of the Appalachian Mountains. It passes through 14 states and all kinds of unpredictable weather. At age 21, Nick, an avid outdoorsman raised in Maine, decided the journey would be a good adventure. The trek takes an average of 6 months. Hiking 20 miles a day through the wilderness for 5 or 6 months will get you to a place you've never been before.

"I guess I wasn't prepared for two things," says Nick. "How hard sections of the trail were going to be, and all the small acts of kindness along the way that kept me going." Those thru-hikers who complete the entire 2,200 miles talk about trail magic, little acts of kindness that happen at exactly the time they are needed. "I had been living on filtered water and granola bars for a month, my legs were aching, my body hurt, and I was having that once-a-week feeling of quitting. I came around a corner, and there was a bag of clementines hanging from a tree. A small thing at home, but on the trail, the taste of that fresh fruit was so amazing it kept me going for days."

As Nick learned, the people who live in the towns that border the trail see it as a privilege to give. "People blindsides you with kindness," Nick says. They provide rides into town when hikers need to replenish. They open their homes to a fresh shower after months on the trail. And they offer encouragement to keep going.

Sweet oranges are one thing. But after Nick's first two weeks on the trail, an unseasonable cold front hit Northern Georgia. Normal temperatures of 20 or 30 degrees Fahrenheit dipped down to 0, and the wind gusted through the branches above. Nick remembers doing situps in his thin sleeping bag all night to keep warm. "I got started early the next morning because I was so cold and had to get moving. I couldn't feel my toes until noon. The next stop was a lean-to 20 miles away, and I decided that if the night was as miserable as the last, I would pack it in. It got dark, and really cold again. But when I entered the lean-to, somebody had

brought up two down comforters---hiked the seven miles in from town hauling two comforters. I was so tired and relieved, I cried. I never slept better in my life."

Nick would go on, experiencing small acts of kindness that motivated him and discovering that his own small acts of kindness kept others going, too. "When you have extra food, you share it. You share a campfire. When it's raining sideways, you build a wall with rain ponchos. You work together. You encourage other thru-hikers to keep going," Nick says. "Once you get through Virginia, you get this energy high because you know you are part of something greater that will support you. You learn to trust it. Not rely on it, just trust it. Your hope develops. And when it's all over, you realize how great the people in this country are."

Trail magic is kindness in action, kindness without being seen. Kindness that becomes the change we all need.

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