

# Into the Woods

By Jay Buckner

 Appalachia

**H**igh atop scenic vistas like Clingman's Dome (6,643 feet), located on the state line between North Carolina and Tennessee and the highest point along the Appalachian Trail, and below rocky crags in Kentucky's Clifty Wilderness, a 13,000-acre wonderland of arches, rock shelters, and imposing cliffs, Megan Connors, '07, and Jim McWhorter, '07, each discovered plentiful learning opportunities.

Jim took 520,000 steps across the Sheltoewe Trace that runs through Tennessee and Kentucky. It took him 18 days to cover 260 miles. Megan walked 4,349,200 steps along the Appalachian Trail that runs from Georgia to Maine. It took her four months to cover 2,174.6 miles. Each traveled the majority of that distance alone. Although their paths never crossed, they shared similar experiences while trekking a combined 2,434 miles. Life on the trail tested their bodies and changed their ideas about what constitutes their daily priorities.

Each student explorer found the process of looking inward equally challenging.

“I willingly threw away the luxuries of ‘real’ life and embraced my new surroundings,” says Megan,

an agriculture and natural resources major.

“The reality of waking up everyday exposed to the elements and facing an exhausting day of hiking became my standard of living, but my success on the trail transformed my perception of what I like to call my ‘real’ life.”

Last summer Jim, a technology and industrial arts major, left Pickett State Park in Jamestown, Tennessee to hike the Sheltoewe Trace, a back country trail that begins there—crossing streams and traversing the ridge of the Appalachian Mountains. Sometimes crossing highways, he dipped into deep forest until he reached the trail’s northern terminus near Morehead, Kentucky. (“Sheltoewe” means Big Turtle, the name that the Shawnee gave Daniel Boone.)

Jim engaged in an independent studies program called *Using Technology*



Megan Connors, '07, trekked the Appalachian Trail in a test of human endurance. Jim McWhorter, '07, hiked the Sheltoewe Trace and was astounded by both its beauty and toxic sludge. This site was found on the Jackson-Owsley county line.

to Document the Sheltoewe Trace that helped him to map accurately the entire trail and document the human impact in the Daniel Boone National Forest. Using his camera and a global positioning system (GPS), he photographed the terrain and recorded coordinates wherever he noticed considerable human impact on the environment.

“The Sheltoewe is a complex patchwork of seen and unseen trails, gravel roads, and paved highways that just begged for better documentation,” says Jim. “There were times that the trail just disappeared, and I had to trust my technology more than my memory.” Averaging 14.5 miles of backpacking each day, Jim took more than 700

photographs, finding opportunities to capture everything from artistic close-ups of eye-catching forest vegetation and water trickling over ledges to stark wide shots of a sludgy toxic dump.

He took this forest hike because he felt he had gained so much from nature that, through his use of technology, he wanted to give something back to the rest of the world. He wanted to bring attention to the environmental hazards, as well as the beauty. Jim ends his online journal with a quote from *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau: *I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.*

While still in high school, Megan began her outdoor forays in earnest. Her occasional hikes eventually grew into a passion for long-distance backpacking. Amazingly, her first long-distance trek when she was a Berea sophomore was the Appalachian Trail. Hiking the entire trail is an astonishing accomplishment, considering that since the year 2000 fewer than 20 percent of hikers who set out to go the distance actually finish it.

In March 2005, Megan began her trek northward, a journey that would last an incredible 124 days, beginning at its southern terminus at the base of Springer Mountain in Georgia. As she began to hike, she knew that it would not end until she had crossed through 14 states—Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine.

“I was really nervous when I started,” she recalls. “I was so scared to walk away from my parents down at Springer, but I also knew I was ready for it. I was just terrified of not making it to Maine.”

At times the mountain seemed an insurmountable challenge—a place of extremes. Megan endured bitter cold, knee deep snow drifts, chilling rains,



A view off the Moonbow Trail near Cumberland Falls.

James McWhorter, '07



Logging roads become ATV sites and rusted-out cars appear along the Sheltoewe Trace in Laurel County.

James McWhorter, '07



A leaking oil pump on the Sheltoewe Trace was recorded at GPS coordinates -83.7011484 and +37.7234965.

James McWhorter, '07



Megan overlooks the river valley that runs beside the Trail.



Megan stops along the trail in New Hampshire.



Rough-going



Celebration is in order after reaching the trails end at Katahdin (Maine) which reaches an altitude of 5,267 feet.

howling winds, lightning storms, suffocating humidity, black flies, thirsty mosquitoes, and poison ivy, in addition to physical maladies like a respiratory infection and food poisoning—to name a few.

Averaging 19 miles per day, Megan's life became a blur of green and brown, but the trail sculpted her mind and body. "The trail is hard. It is relentless. The strength I developed felt absent while I was hiking," says Megan. "I cured my pain with breathtaking scenery and felt I needed to sacrifice more to be worthy of what I was seeing. . . The physical aspects of the trail were trying, but the mental strain was exhausting. The mental fatigue almost got me multiple times."

While walking the trail she also completed two independent studies classes—a general studies course in expressive writing and a course in physical education. For the first class, Megan kept an in-depth written journal and photographic record from which she would later share her experiences upon her return to Berea. During her independent studies work in physical education, she used her journal as a means to contemplate and record the physical demands of the human body while hiking long distance.

Megan's physical education professor, Melody Srsic, says "Many who set out on this task do not complete it. Megan serves as an example of good planning, following one's dream, determination, and physical and mental endurance."

On July 4, 2005, Megan completed her journey, arriving at the summit of Mount Katahdin in Maine. From its height she could look back upon her long journey; she needed no fireworks.

"When I finished, I felt bigger than life," she says. "Tears of joy and sorrow rolled down my face. It was all over. Now, I didn't need to worry about surviving the Appalachian Trail. I needed to worry about surviving *without* it."