

Thousand-Miler Essay
Ari Clouse

I always knew that I would finish a solo thru-hike of the Ice Age Trail, because I'm a very independent and determined (read: stubborn) person. My father told me when I finished that he always knew I would finish, too, because when I set out to do something, I do it. Being on my own for hours or days, focusing intently on a singular goal or task, relying on my own wits - these are all things with which I have never had much difficulty. It's what has fueled my career, first as a professional stage manager, and then later as a project manager.

Where I knew I was going to struggle would be in the moments I needed to rely on others, or ask for help. There was a whole group of people in the Thousand-Miler Wanabees facebook group that I never reached out to before I started my hike. I contacted the IATA only a few times before I started, and spent months without following up to an email from Sharon Dziengel, who offered to answer any of my questions about thru-hiking. I found a thru-hiker currently on the trail on Reddit, and when her advice to me was to make sure I put all the chapter coordinator contacts in my phone, I kept putting it off and eventually never did it.

Why didn't I want people who *actually knew* about the trail to know about my thru-hike? I was afraid I was going to do the hike wrong. I had done a few overnight backpacking trips, but I didn't really know what it was like to hike for several entire days with a full backpack. I already felt like I was doing it wrong by not completing a section-hike instead. So much of the infrastructure and culture of the IAT seemed set up for section-hikers. People would develop friendships with other hiking buddies while knocking out another CR on their list. Meanwhile, I was staring down the prospect of never meeting another thru-hiker on trail at all.

Actually, that aspect was part of why I was so interested in the IAT - on a more popular trail like the Appalachian Trail or the Pacific Crest Trail, I would be around other thru-hikers, who had more experience than me, or better gear than me, or went faster than I did, or did more miles than I did, or who were smarter about nutrition, or had a much lighter baseweight, or or, or. On the IAT, I would be sure to complete several days or weeks of miles without almost anyone seeing me, and then, once I felt like I knew what I was doing, I could start reaching out to others - maybe even some of the "trail angels" on the contact list the IATA gives to thru-hikers.

First of all, once I was on the hike, I never truly ever felt like I knew what I was doing. After mile 300, 400, 800, 1000 (when I discovered that this *entire time* I had my backpack straps set for too high of a torso, and that the sharp, horrible pain in my left shoulder was indeed avoidable), I was still learning new things, new strategies for hiking several miles a day with 40 lbs on my back, sometimes for an entire day along county highway roads with no place to take a break. So if I was waiting for the "right time" to feel "experienced enough" about contacting strangers for help, then that moment never would come.

The other thing that happened that rudely interrupted my plan to stay in the background was that my backpack and trekking poles were stolen on the 6th day of my thru-hike. This is a story

I've now told more times than I really care to, particularly because even though this event was incredibly upsetting, it was entirely preventable. If I had taken an extra 30 seconds to actually attempt to hide my belongings, instead of carelessly propping them up alongside the road -- or, even, if I had just brought my things with me to the river while I filtered water -- there would never have been an opportunity for someone to drive up while I was collecting water, snatch the gear I had spent over a year acquiring, and drive away while I was completely oblivious. So if I was hoping that I could fool people into not knowing about my inexperience as a thru-hiker, then that opportunity was shattered very early on as well. I eventually became known as "the girl whose backpack got stolen."

Within minutes, I had to rely on absolute strangers. My phone (in my fanny pack, which I had thankfully kept with me, along with my wallet) had one bar of service and the cutting in and out of the connection, coupled with my choking sobs, meant that my parents could barely understand where I was. I honestly thought that I would just sit by the side of the road, crying my eyes out, for hours, until they found me. Finally, a woman out on a walk crossed the road and came over to me and asked what was going on, and then walked me over to the house next door, where she knew someone who knew about the Ice Age Trail lived. We roused John (an Indianhead Chapter member) and his wife Rosmarie out of bed, and once I was able to calm down enough to explain what happened, the first thing John said to me was, "You want me to take a picture of you?" I very much did not want my picture taken - my face was red, puffy, and streaked with tears - but, caught off guard and dumbfounded, I let him maneuver me next to Julie, the woman who found me, and took my phone to take a picture of the two of us. I know now that this was an absolutely brilliant tactic on John's part to get me to calm down and force my face to at least make the shape of a smile.

John and Rosmarie were the first trail angels I met. They let me use their bathroom, their phone to call my mom to give her an actual pick-up location (she had gotten in the car at 6:30am in Marshfield and just started driving northeast, figuring I would be able to update her on the road), called the sheriff to make a report of the theft, and let me, a filthy hiker, sit on their nice furniture and talked with me while we waited. We learned that we had lots in common -- they even had a friend who lived on the same street that I lived on in Chicago -- and I felt so taken care of and comforted that I was so happy to have met them, irrespective of the circumstances. Here I was in an incredibly vulnerable moment that was the direct result of my thru-hiking inexperience, and these people were so kind and helpful to me, and never once made me feel judged or bad for my mistake.

This experience opened my eyes to the wonderful community from which I had deliberately shut myself out. The police never found my backpack, but my renter's insurance did cover the replacement of my gear. I actually got the idea to contact the insurance company from someone in the Thousand-Miler Wanabees facebook group -- a suggestion that saved me many hundreds of dollars. Some people were even generous enough to send me some money to help replace my gear. Four days later, when I had resupplied everything and was ready to pick back up, John insisted that he be the one to drive me back to the exact spot I had my things stolen. I finally

finished the Straight River Segment, and when I got to the beginning of the Pine Lake Segment, I cheered - I was officially moving forward.

As my hike progressed, I continued to meet more trail angels. I met many of them by complete happenstance on the trail, without any prior planning.

In Brill, as I rested outside a baseball field, mentally gearing up for another six miles to get to my campsite, a local walked up and invited me to stay in a log cabin they had built by hand with their sons (I saw the photo album of them stripping pine bark with hand tools) in the 1990's. Their farm was now a beautiful wedding venue, and I stayed most of the next morning drinking coffee and trading life stories with the husband-and-wife team. I cried when I left Birchwood because I was so happy to have met them and so sad to have to leave them.

On the Wood Lake segment in Taylor County, Laura bounded down the trail with a packet of turkey jerky as I miserably peeled off my soaking wet boots and socks after wading through an abandoned beaver dam that could no longer hold the weight of a human being above the water. "Are you a thru-hiker too?" I asked. "Oh, I've already done it, I'm on my second section-hike completion. I've already hiked about 20 miles today so I think I might just finish Taylor County while I'm up here." I hadn't even hit 300 miles yet and here was someone who was only about that distance away from hiking the entire IAT for the second time. And she was so... chipper about it, which was really ruining my soggy mood. I let her write her name and number in my notebook, promising that I'd give her a call to stay with her when I got near Madison, convinced that I would never do so. Eventually, Laura ended up being one of my greatest friends that I've met on the IAT. She even met up with me later in Manitowoc as she crossed off a few more segments on her list.

Two dogs suddenly appeared at a trail junction on the Kettlebowl segment, wearing special radio collars with long, bouncy arced antennas, and bounded up to me. I saw absolutely no trace of an owner nearby and I'm not much of a dog person, so after I calmed down enough to understand that they seemed really only interested in my beef jerky, I told them "No" enough in a strong enough voice that they seemed to just shrug and trot away, like "Whatever." A few minutes later as I started back down the trail, they came up again and started following me. One of them took ahead of me on the trail, leading, while the other stayed behind me, following - it was always the same dog in the same position. We ended up hiking together for at least an hour or more. I started to chat with them, and they kept me company. I rolled my eyes when we would get to an overgrown, raspberry-thorn-choked part of trail and the dog in front casually stopped, moved to the side and seemed to indicate that I was very much welcome to be the one in front now. One turn, they went down a side trail another direction from me, and I never saw them again. They were trail angels for me, too.

After spending the night at the Lapham Peak backpack site in the Kettle Moraine State Forest (where there will someday be a new shelter!), I figured I deserved a hotel stay in Delafield to allow me to take a nice hot shower and finally launder my absolutely disgusting clothes. While I was at the Nemahbin Spring, I called up one hotel after another and my face fell as I was told

that every single place was booked solid due to several weddings and the Ryder Cup that weekend. At that point, with my heart set on a hotel room, and about to approach civilization again, I couldn't bear the idea of staying in a tent in my filthy clothes one more night. I decided that I was finally going to learn my own lesson about asking for help, so I sent a quick post to the Thousand Miler Wannabe's facebook group. Within an hour Amy messaged me: "We have hosted cross country bicyclists through Warm Showers. We would be happy to have you stay at our house tonight. We have a downstairs bed and private bathroom if interested." She picked me up in Delafield after I finished my resupply and drove me to her family's house in Waukesha, where I ate homemade pizza and talked with her two kids about my hike. I got to take a hot shower, do my laundry, learn about the family's chickens and which birds got along (and which didn't), and sipped a Wisconsin Old-Fashioned by the fire pit. I slept more soundly that night than I did any other night on trail.

Finally, it would be inappropriate for me to talk about the trail angels I've had without mentioning my own parents. I am an only child in her early 30s who chooses to do things like quit her job to hike several hundreds of miles instead of producing grandchildren, and my parents have never been anything other than supportive of me. They drove me to the terminus, took my distress call at 6am when my things were stolen 6 days later, and continued to meet with me periodically along the trail to bring me my clean "civilian clothes", drive me to the grocery store and/or laundromat, and treat me to a real meal. I saw my parents more in the past 3 months on my hike than I have in the past five years. After I got out of the Chequamegon National Forest, where I lacked cell service and was unreachable for several days, they figured out how to track my location on my phone for better piece of mind in the future. They used this on the last day of my hike to discover that I was approaching the eastern terminus ahead of schedule and they drove down from their hotel an hour away in Sister Bay (continuing my theme of fully-booked hotel rooms, I apparently chose a Packers game day to finish my hike), determined to meet me there so they could celebrate the end with me. I know they are just as grateful as I am for all the wonderful people who have helped me on this hike, from those who let me stay with them to the people who let me refill my water bottles from their spigots while I struggled on long CRs.

I don't really feel like I "solo" thru-hiked the IAT -- I did it with so, so much help. The trail magic I experienced really did feel like magic. It was unplanned, unexpected, and so generous -- just individual people reaching out to help. I would get a coffee at Crossroads in Cross Plains and a group of people having a Labor Day breakfast outside would welcome me to sit with them and eat all the fruit, eggs, sausage, and Bloody Mary I could want. I would meet section hikers who excitedly gave me snacks. I would meet a couple of people who pulled over in towns to give me lifts to my hotel, or to the grocery store. (Sadly, as much as I dreamed about it, no one ever pulled over for me on a CR, offering me a ride. I'm glad they didn't because there were some days I would have absolutely taken the easy out and cheated). Even having someone ask me if I was hiking the Ice Age Trail made me feel welcomed. I'm so grateful that I met so many people along the way who could teach me the value of reaching out or relying on others in order to accomplish this goal not just by myself, but with everyone along the way who helped me.