



Ice Age Trail Completion Essay

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A SINGLE STEP

"A journey of 1000 miles begins with a single step", attributed to Lao Tzu, can also be translated as "a journey of 1000 miles starts beneath one's feet."

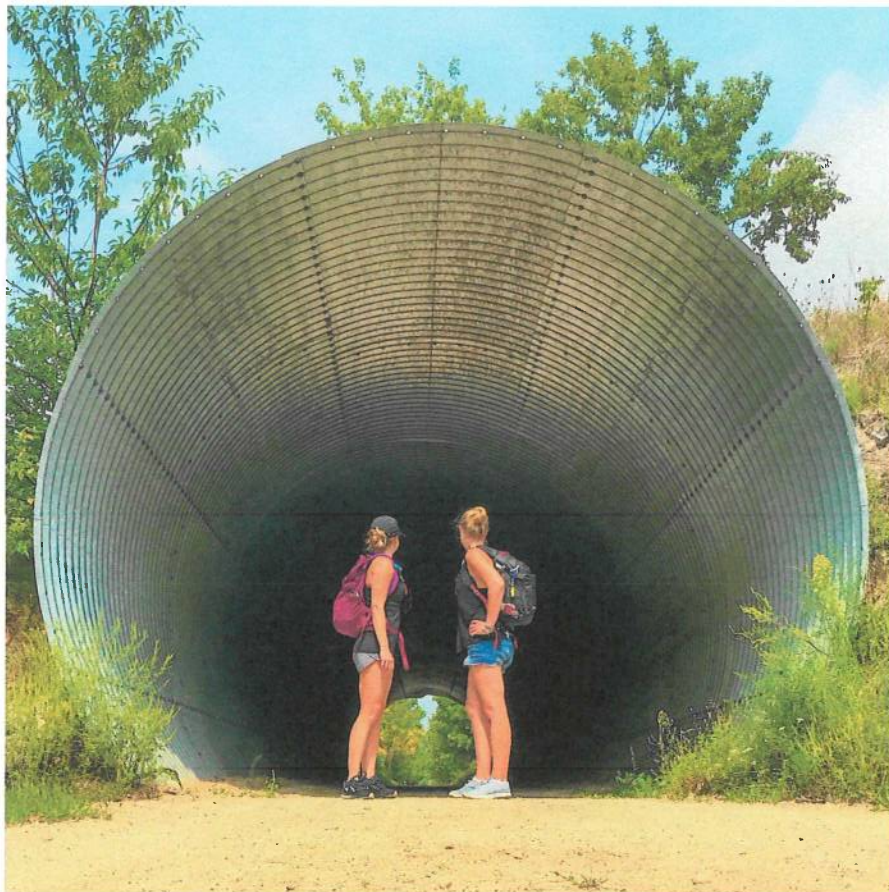
Ironically, the inspiration to begin this journey of "mammoth proportions" came to me in the polar opposite of places - in Las Vegas, Nevada. The challenge of hiking a National Scenic Trail came to me poolside, with a cocktail in one hand and Cheryl Strayed's 'Wild' in the other. In a moment of determined, albeit buzzed clarity, I decided that, like Cheryl, I was going to hike a big, long trail too! Full of newfound inspiration, the first obvious step was, of course, to Google 'where are the national scenic trails?' Imagine my dumbstruck luck at finding that there was a National Scenic Trail right in my lovely home-state of Wisconsin. As a teenager, I begrudgingly hiked in the Kettle Moraine with my parents. How was I completely unaware that this trail was in our state? Pleasantly surprised - then and there - I made the decision to go on my very own, epic hike!

A month later, with my sister in tow, we headed to Potawatomi State Park - the eastern terminus - to take our first steps into the unknown. We had casually hiked before, sporadically and irregularly, but this adventure called for a grand start. We planned to hike the entire first segment. All 13.7 miles of it. And when I say we, I mean me. My sister wasn't "fully" aware of how long the hike would be. Oops. My bad. 15 miles later (due to our navigational blunders), with several blisters and very tired legs, we had finished our first hike on the Ice Age Trail. My sister admonished my bad planning and stated that she would not be doing this again anytime soon. It only took two days for her to change her mind. We were hooked. As a team, we completed just over 370 miles together in the course of a year and a half. We had so much fun! We bonded, we solved the problems that life threw our way and at times, we questioned our sanity. It was such an incredible journey to take, as sisters. These miles together taught us so much - what we were capable of, what we needed for gear, how to organize our progress, and how to become safer and better prepared hikers.

Sadly, the steady and pleasant progress of our journey came to a screeching halt. As with so many people, 2020 threw our lives in new directions and we found it more and more difficult to get our feet back on the trail.

A year and a half. Not a single hike.

The feelings of being stuck, uncomfortable, and displeased with the trajectory of my life became unbearable last summer. I felt compelled to find a new direction. I needed to re-route my life onto a path that was more exciting, adventurous and active. And where better to dig deep and rediscover who I am and where I'm meant to go - than into the woods? I felt a new, thrilling sense of determination. I was going to finish the remaining 800 or so miles, and - with a deadline. I reflected on why I had decided to hike this trail in the first place. I had wanted to challenge myself to do something bigger than I ever had done before. Now, it was time to find out what I was capable of.



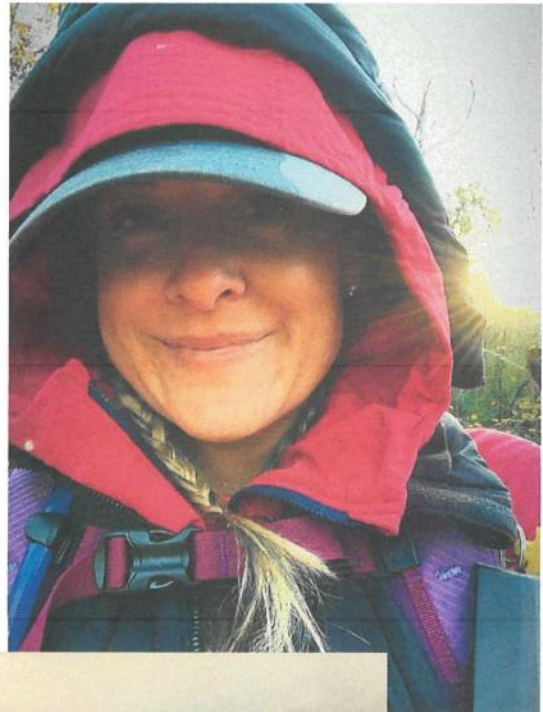
Up to that point, I had hiked a reasonable 370 miles, but it took me a year and a half to do it. My initial lofty goal was 100 miles a month, and that was 5 times more than I had ever hiked before. It was exactly the physical and mental challenge I was looking for. At that rate I would I would be done in May of 2022. Further reflection on my prior hiking experiences reminded me how much I disliked hiking in the snow and cold of winter. I upped my estimate to 150 miles a month. Then I could be done by my birthday, in February of 2022. Hmm, that's still hiking in the winter though. Could I do 200 miles a month? That would have me done, well, before the New Year!

Never mind that I had never attempted anything of this magnitude before. I was going to do it. And I did.

I am often asked how I started this journey to hike the Ice Age Trail. And, before I can even answer, it is quickly followed up by the statement, "I wouldn't be able to do that." I always share the Lao Tzu quote. To achieve any goal, it really only takes one step. Come up with an idea. Then take a step, no matter how small. And then take another step. And before you know it, all those little steps lead you down your path. Many steps in a row make progress. Mis-step and you are forced to reroute. Mis-steps aren't bad, I like to think they lead to a lesson before sending you on your way. Breaking any goal into manageable, "bite-size" steps is how you accomplish things

beyond your wildest dreams. It can be daunting to look too far ahead. Focus just on your next steps, and then the ones immediately after those. Before you know it, you will turn around in amazement at how far you've come.

The journey of completing the Ice Age Trail is not just a physical one. I would wager that most hikers believe that the challenge of hiking a trail like this is a mental one. Having sight of the yellow blazes ensures that you are on the right path physically, but the amount of time that you spend silently in your own head while hiking is a form of meditation that I've been unable to replicate, even as a yoga teacher. It is those quiet moments on the trail that guide you where you are meant to go. To many of us, that may look like finally figuring out how to handle a particular situation. Perhaps resolving to do more of something that brings joy, or in the final letting go of something that is not for your greatest good. I found that while silently taking one step after another on the trail, I was able to work through the most impactful, although sometimes tiny, re-directions that steered me back on course.





Slowing down, to a pace of one step followed by another, I also experienced life in richer detail and with greater respect. I have a new appreciation for roadside Chicory and Purple Love Grass now that I've walked beside them rather than sped past them at highway speeds. In the eerie silence of fall and winter, the crunch of my footsteps on fall leaves and frozen earth was incredibly delightful to my ears. Even while strenuously breaking trail through deep snow surrounded by a desolate winter landscape, the warm scent of wood fireplaces burning somewhere nearby sparked moments of joy that were reminiscent of my childhood. And, nothing can compare to the overwhelming amount of gratitude and physical relief that came with finally seeing my car at the trailhead after a difficult hike and knowing that I could finally take a load off of my weary feet.

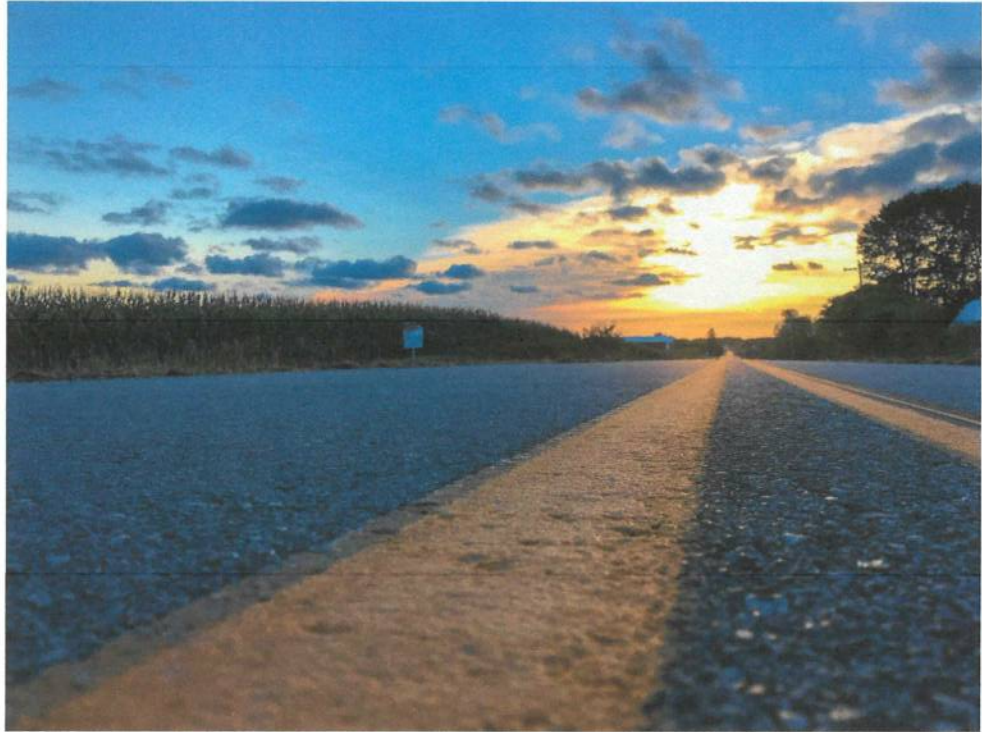
As a meticulous organizer and planner, I had mapped out every hike leading up to my completion goal of December 30th. It did not leave much wiggle room and had me hiking 3

to 4 days every week. I hiked east-to-west, in order, for over 1,000 miles. It wasn't the physical challenge that nearly stopped me. It was winter in Wisconsin. Two large snow storms in December devastated my plans of smooth sailing from Chippewa County to the western terminus. The only way to salvage the hiking days I had left was by hiking out-of-order on



other area segments that might be more accessible. It felt wrong in so many ways to not be hiking on my beautifully laid out path, as much like a through hike as possible. But, it was the compromise that I needed to make in order to achieve my goal. In the end, I completed the Ice Age Trail within 2 hours of my estimate that was made months earlier. Even though the path wasn't always the one I foresaw myself taking, the trail still guided me to where I needed to go. The lesson I learned here, was how to let go and let the path come to me.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the fact that one of the greatest gifts I received from hiking the Ice Age Trail was the incredible people that I've met along the way. From Trail Angels who so generously offered their time to shuttle me, to "strangers" that I met through the Facebook groups who agreed to



hike with me. Not only did these seemingly chance encounters lead to deep conversations on the trail that helped nudge me on my way in life, they have inspired me to help others on their Ice Age Trail journey. I look forward to hiking familiar trails again with a new driving force.

For me, hiking the Ice Age Trail was a way to break free from a stagnant, uninspiring time in my life. It brought challenge, excitement and exploration of the unknown all while I was literally exploring the land right beneath my feet. It taught me that I am far more capable than I think I am. I have much bigger hiking goals now. I think that most people would find that this is the case for them as well. Until you challenge yourself, how will you know what you are able to achieve? There is no growth in the comfort zone.

And that, I think is the ultimate lesson that I have learned from hiking the Ice Age Trail. It applies to life both on and off the trail. Beware of the "boulevard trap." If the trail you're on appears to be too easy or too good to be true, chances are, you may not be on the right path! Whether it is the lack of blazes in view that leads you to believe you are off-trail, or the little nudges you receive as you are searching for your path in life, get out of your comfort zone. It's a trap!
