

Grace Zhang

For the past twenty years, I have lived in Madison. Despite my home being less than two miles away from the closest Ice Age Trail segment, I rarely even stepped foot in Ice Age Trail — much less considered hiking it — until Christmas Eve of 2019.

On that day, my friend Xiping Wang took a group of us on a beautiful hike on the part of the Cross Plains Segment near Hickory Hill Street. The temperature was warm for December. The trail was quiet and peaceful; only our chat and laughter sometimes broke through the quietness. The entire hike was about 3 miles, and we all enjoyed it very much and felt we did enough exercise to earn the right to feast on a big Christmas meal!

We liked it so much that when the new year arrived, our group went on a few other hiking trips: the Brooklyn Wildlife segment, part of the Verona segment, the Indian Lake segment, and the Eastern Lodi Marsh segment. They were all close to home and were about 3 miles for each hike. Then spring of 2020 came, and the pandemic hit us. The world went into lockdown, and our group ceased hiking together.

Like many other people, I didn't like being completely locked in the house; fearing COVID, the outdoors became the only place I could go to enjoy nature and find peace. I started hiking with my family or by myself. It started with just 3 miles, then 5 miles, 7 miles, and then 9 miles each time. The Ice Age Trail gave us back freedom. Before the summer began, I finished hiking all of the Dane County segments and earned my first badge! Encouraged and enjoying the trail, I considered completing the entire Ice Age Trail.

However, as I hiked segments further away from Madison, I felt the challenge of shuttling and driving to each segment. My husband sometimes joined me hiking or shuttled me; we camped in the state parks and bike-shuttled some of the trails. It was exhausting to bike shuttle or walk out and back, and I questioned how I could finish the entire trail.

Later, as the fall approached, I began hiking with my friends again, in a safe, socially-distanced manner. My friend Ping Yi began joining me, and then another friend, Elaine Fang. Occasionally a few more friends also came along with us. We shuttled and hiked as a group; it became easier to travel further and hike longer distances. We ran into our original hiking organizer Xiping Wang at the Holly Hill segment. He had already set his mind on finishing IAT and had recruited our other friend Nianqing Wang to do it with him. We began hiking with them when the winter started. Then in spring of 2021, we started camping and hiking together and carefully planned how we would complete the entire IAT. During this time, our hiking group grew bigger — we often had more than a dozen people camping and hiking together. The Beyond Hiking team was born.

We hiked in the rain, under the scorching summer sun, in knee-deep fresh snow, and through rushing creeks. We were chased by an infantry of mosquitos and attacked by ticks. But we also enjoyed the sunrise at Point Beach, the moonrise at Rib Lake, wildflowers, and fall colors in the woods and prairies. I loved stepping on the thick beds of pine needles covering the ground and appreciated the perfect reflection on the lake.

The most valuable things I gained from hiking the Ice Age Trail were the better relationship with my family and the stronger friendship and deeper fellowship between our Beyond Hiking team members. My son, who was an Eagle Scout and loves the outdoors, joined me on many segments. Once I began sharing his interest in outdoor activities, we began speaking the same language and were able to connect more deeply. We talked about college, friends, future, and he and his sister's childhood memories. My husband has always loved fishing, which I could never understand at all. Being outdoors and learning to enjoy nature in different ways, including eating his catches by the campfire, helped us understand each other's hobby better. Within our hiking group, we

shared our challenges and joys around the campfire. We celebrated each other's milestones. We enjoyed hotpot with the contributions from my husband's fishing trips. We rang in Chinese New Year with a feast on a hiking trip. Many of our team members are Christians, and we shared our lives and encouraged each other in our walk following our Lord. I got to know many friends beyond just friendly chats, and we built a much stronger bond and trust with each other.

When many people felt isolated and lost connection with others during the pandemic, hiking IAT gave me freedom in nature and connected me with the beautiful creation and my friends and family. I am so glad that Xiping, Nianqing, and I had the same goal of finishing the Ice Age Trail, and that we coordinated each trip together and had many team members join us and support each other. As a result, Xiping, Nianqing, and I were able to finish the Ice Age Trail on the same weekend! Our friends and team members Yiping and Elaine also celebrated completing 800 miles and 600 miles of the Ice Age Trail, respectively, that same weekend with us! It was a joy to do what I love with a great group of friends. Without my family and my team members, I wouldn't be able to complete the entire trail soon.

The Ice Age Trail also showed me the beauty of community amongst strangers. During the pandemic, there were many Asian hate crimes occurring across the country. As a predominantly Chinese hiking group, we were extra cautious when traveling and hiking. While we did experience a few unfriendly encounters, overall, the other people we met on the trail were friendly. There were the people who helped us to pull our car out from a snow-covered ditch; and the couple who saw us hiking a Connector Route in 90-degree weather and went home to grab some ice-cold water and cookies to give to us; and the kind people who gave us a ride to our car after we mistakenly parked a few miles away from our endpoint.

The pandemic and the beauty of nature led me to the Ice Age Trail, spurring me start hiking my first few miles. I am glad that I believed in what philosopher Xun-Zi said: "Without accumulating every single step, one cannot complete the thousand-mile journey." (不积跬步,无以至千里). Changes start small, but persistence brings the reward. When I set foot on the IAT the first few times, I was inexperienced and weak, both physically and spiritually; I could not hike for more than 5 miles without pain. After completing IAT, I know I am stronger, bolder, and love nature and others more. I am better than my previous self; that is the greatest gift Ice Age Trail gave me. I love it!!