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IAT 1000+ Miler Essay
July 17, 2022

I wish I could say that hiking the Ice Age Trail was the most gloriously enjoyable activity I have ever undertaken in my lifetime. It was not. Hiking the IAT was the most difficult and painful goal I have ever set for myself and achieved. Knowing what I know now about the challenges, risks, and hardships that I would experience trying to walk this entire trail, would I still do it? Yes! (Once.)

Why? Because, I am much healthier for having made this effort.

My Goal:

I started hiking the IAT to improve my health. My concerns included pre-diabetes, chronic lung congestion, increasing obesity, high blood pressure, family history of heart disease, and overall loss of strength, balance, and mobility. My progress on the IAT was slow and very painful, but I'm now stronger and more capable of physical activity than I have been in many years.

For decades I tried to improve my exercise habits, but nothing worked, until I tried hiking the IAT. The reason for my success? When you're hiking, you're stuck on the trail, and the only way out is to walk yourself out. When you get to the end, there's a rush of relief and pride, because "Thank God That's Over With!" and "I made it. I can't believe it! **I** made it!"

My Rewards:

During this journey, I've had a love/hate relationship with the Ice Age Trail, but I accomplished my goal. I walked the whole trail, including the connecting routes, and I'm much healthier for having done so. I just had my annual physical exam, including fasting labs, and the results were the best reward I could have asked for. All of my lab work came back with substantial improvements. I am no longer worried about having to go on insulin.

Surprisingly, there were other rewards as well.

I was awed and sometimes moved to tears by the beauty, diversity of environments, and opportunity to see my home (Wisconsin) in ways that I've never seen it before. Sometimes a single tree, or flower, or creature would stop me in my tracks and humble me with its will to survive. It gave me the strength to keep walking when my body ached with pain. Watching mated swans, beavers with their industrious lives, ferns unrolling in the spring, thunderstorms building and filling the sky with their power and majesty, the soothing smell of pine or the earthy smell of the forest after a rain - what glorious rewards these were. They kept me going when I wanted to quit.

One of my most unexpected rewards came from other hikers, many of whom told me that my sharing the hardships of my journey made the IAT feel more inclusive. They felt like they could make the IAT their home too, even though they were not the first, the fastest, or the best. They felt like now they could call themselves Hikers too, even if they were slow, challenged, or had issues to work out on the trail. They told me I was inspiring. If being an outspoken, stubborn, little, old, fat lady inspires people to better themselves, then what a lovely gift that is for all of us. I loved hearing about their goals, their efforts, and their successes. We encouraged each other. This was my greatest reward of all!

The Ice Age Trail certainly is a healthy, healing place. I'm glad I decided to take a walk!!!