

## My Journey of a Thousand Miles

Joan Jaeckel

I am a collector of quotes and two by Eleanor Roosevelt encouraged me on my quest to become a Thousand Miler:

“Being brave doesn’t mean you are not afraid. Being brave means that you are afraid but do it anyways.”

“You must do the thing you think you cannot do”.

It was a lovely, fall day in October 2014 as my husband, Alan, and I hiked in the Southern Kettle Moraine Forest. The trail we happened to be hiking was marked with yellow blazes and we later learned that we were on the Ice Age Trail. After our hike we picked up a brochure about the Ice Age Trail and thought it would be cool to segment hike the entire trail. It sounded good, but in the back of my mind I questioned my ability and determination to actually do it.

Little did I know then that several years later I would complete a journey of 1,100 plus miles in all seasons, on trails that both challenged and inspired me.

The first two years I logged only a few miles and was doubtful that I’d ever complete the trail. Then Alan and I decided to purchase the Ice Age Guide Book and began some serious planning. In June of 2016 we drove to St. Croix Falls and hiked for 5 days. While hiking the Gandy Dancer Segment I saw my first and only black bear on the trail. It was quite a way off in the distance, thankfully. Encountering a black bear up close was always one of my biggest fears.

As my husband and I both worked full time we mostly hiked on weekends and an occasional week during the summer. Early in our IAT journey we’d hike the segments “in and out”, then we took two vehicles so as not to double our mileage. As we traveled further from home, we took our bikes and bicycled back to the car after our hike. We then heard about IAT chapter volunteers willing to shuttle hikers, what a blessing they were! I learned so much about the trail from the volunteers and appreciate all the hard work they do to maintain the trail. They are truly “trail angels”.

Hiking the IAT was a learning experience in which I gained knowledge, appreciation, and a collection of memories I’ll cherish forever.

I came to appreciate the trail in all seasons and conditions. On those beautiful hiking days, I’d take my time and enjoy the beauty. My favorite trails were those that took me along eskers, crossing rivers, through pine forests, enjoying the scent and soft needles under my boots. I enjoyed the segments that followed the shore of Lake Michigan with its beautiful hues of blue water, sand and cool breezes. I found peace of mind and contentment. After a couple weeks of not hiking, I’d be anxious to get back!

Even in not so perfect hiking conditions with varying temperatures, (as high as 96° and low as 15°) mud, snow, (with depths up to my knees) bugs, hills that kept coming, stretches of connecting route that seemed to never end, there was still beauty to be found. After completing the challenging parts I always felt a sense of accomplishment – doing the thing I thought I could not.

I have a greater appreciation for my husband, the best hiking partner, for his patience with me during the challenging times. I learned from his knowledge about the greater outdoors and discovered his sense of direction is far superior to mine!

As a Facebook Thousand Miler Wannabe I admire and have so much respect for the strong women who have hiked the trail solo. I enjoyed visiting our smaller communities in Wisconsin, especially the Ice Age Trail communities. And I'm grateful for the work of the Ice Age Trail Alliance and its volunteers.

There were many highlights along the way; seeing an eagle nest, an eagle feeding alongside the road, a porcupine, a black bear, blankets of spring flowers, a field of lupine and breathtaking scenery. But the best was on one of our final hikes in Taylor County. Buzz Meyer, an Ice Age Trail volunteer, was shuttling us to the Camp 28 trailhead when he spotted a white deer just off the road. Buzz stopped his truck, rolled down the window, and Alan was able to get a photo of the deer. It stood perfectly still facing us, then slowly turned and walked back into the woods! I researched white deer in Wisconsin and read that sighting a white deer can be "symbolic of an upcoming renewal or change in perspective promoting a higher sense of self-worth and joy". Well, hiking the Ice Age Trail has certainly given me a higher sense of self-worth, accomplishment and joy!

On July 11, 2022 it was a joy filled day hiking my last 4.9 miles of the Sturgeon Bay Segment with my husband, our three children and their spouses, and eight of our grandchildren! As Alan and I took those final steps we were cheered on and greeted with high-fives and hugs! I'm so grateful for the encouragement, love and support my family has given me on this journey! I did the thing I thought I could not!

