



Gordon DuBois of New Hampton, seen here at center, celebrates with friends and family after completing the Appalachian Trail. He's joined by (left to right) Bob Manley, Sarah Dubois Boyd, Gordon Dubois, Megan Dubois, and Hannah Gabrielle Freehof. (Courtesy photo)

New Hampton's 'Gorbo' completes solo hike of 2,181 mile Appalachian Trail

By ADAM DRAPCHO
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NEW HAMPTON — Gordon DuBois, thanks to the enthusiastic reception to the "Lost in Laconia" documentary that he helped create, recently made a name for himself as an authority on the controversial history of the Laconia State School. For the past few months, though, he's been answering to a different name, "Gorbo," his trail name as he hiked the Appalachian Trail.

DuBois, who turned 65 in April, said hiking the scenic 2,181 mile trail was an idea that was planted in his mind decades ago, as a young father who was on a family hike when they stumbled upon a sign directing hikers toward the Appalachian Trail, which runs continuously from Mount Kata-

din in Maine to Georgia's Springer Mountain.

It was the first time DuBois had heard of the trail. "I got home and started reading about it." The adventure and challenge intrigued him, but children and career responsibilities intervened, giving the idea a 40-year gestation period.

In 2006, though, DuBois retired from his career in the disability field and started a second career: hiking. That year, he hiked a portion of the Long Trail and in 2007 put his boots on the Appalachian Trail. His plan of attack was to divide and conquer, starting in North Adams, Mass. and hiking the northern 600 miles of the trail. He intended to return the next year and complete the 1,600 miles from North Adams to Georgia.

Though DuBois found himself with the time and determination to hike, his body was less capable than it was when he first found out about the trail. Specifically, years of running and basketball had left his knees battered. He covered much of his first stretch of the trail without incident, but by the time he reached Gorham, his right knee was so painful that he decided
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to make a detour to the hospital in Berlin, where doctors recommended a total knee replacement but agreed to drain the fluid from his knee, give him a shot of cortisone and point him in the direction of the trail head.

He reached the trail's end in Maine and in October of that year had his right knee replaced. He hoped to finish the rest of the trail the next year, but, "the knee wasn't right. I put the Appalachian Trail hike on hold." Instead, he started working on the International Appalachian Trail, an unofficial trail that continues north from Maine and crosses into Quebec.

Still, he harbored the desire to finish what he had started in 2007 and achieve a goal he had set for himself decades earlier. "It just fascinated me that you could walk from Maine to Georgia on this continuous trail." He loved the stories hikers reported, of meeting unusual and interesting people and seeing places of natural beauty that are only revealed to hikers. "It was that sense of adventure, hiking that many miles," that gripped his imagination, said DuBois.

His dream deferred was revived this year on June 14, when he returned to North Adams and started walking south. It took him four months, but on October 22, DuBois reached the summit of Springer Mountain, where he was greeted by family members and friends.

His numbers were as follows: he hiked for about 11 hours each day, covering an average of 14 miles and wore through four pairs of footwear. His right knee held up, but his other knee decided to become problematic enough that he stopped in Waynesboro, Virginia, for a steroid shot in that knee. He's planning to replace his left knee in January.

DuBois had his share of foot trouble, too, which was instigated by the stretch of the trail that runs through Pennsylvania. "Pennsylvania was the worst hike of my life," he said. The trails had him hiking over mile after mile of sharp, loose rocks, rocks which wore out his hiking shoes. Once the shoes were stretched out, his feet began to slip around within them and he developed the hiker's bane of blisters. Other hikers were happy to offer tips and blister-ameliorating supplies to "Gorbo," though, illustrating the sense of helpful camaraderie that the trail culture is known for.

Taking the ethic to the extreme were the "trail angels," people who supported hikers through various means. Some would leave bottled water where the trail crossed a roadway, others would leave cool-

ers full of ice cream at shelters, one man cooks a deluxe trail side breakfast for hikers.

Not all hikers behaved so benevolently, apparently. While DuBois was trekking through Virginia, a hiker's body was discovered buried in a shallow grave near the trail. The FBI is investigating the suspicious death. News of the violence reached DuBois as he was experiencing a period where he would hike for several days at a time without coming across another person.

Despite the blisters, bad knee and news of an untimely death, DuBois said he was determined to savor every day of the adventure. He started every day with the song, "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning," borrowed from the musical "Oklahoma!" "I looked forward to this for so long, I had so many things that prevented me from doing it, I finally got on the trail, nothing was going to stop me, nothing was going to prevent me from enjoying it."

"I knew I would get to Springer Mountain," DuBois said, explaining that he never doubted his eventual success, even though statistics predict that only about one of every five hikers that begin the trail will endure to see it through. "I know I'm a person that's very goal-oriented. When I say I'm going to do something, I'm going to do it."

He met many interesting and helpful people along the way, including Jennifer Pharr-Davis, who this year set a record by completing the trail in an astonishing 46.5 days. He came across several who hiked with a dog but only one man who brought along a cat. While in Pennsylvania, he crossed paths with a Civil Air Patrol, which used his blistered feet as an opportunity for an impromptu first-aid class.

Now that he's had several days to recover from and reflect on the hike, DuBois said the hike has helped him see his life from a new perspective. "The solitude, putting yourself at the edge of what you can do personally as an individual. Leaving the society that is so technologically intrusive, to depending on everything you have in your backpack."

"It gave me a space to put everything aside, break that cycle, look at who I am, my age and what's a priority for my life." He concluded that he's ready to leave behind his career in disability care and that he wants to continue to make hiking, especially winter hiking, a priority for his life, to continue life as "Gorbo."

DuBois is available to speak for groups who would like to hear more about his adventures. He can be reached at 279-0379 or forestpd@metrocast.net.