



Photo credit: Alison Aloisio

Deaf, blind AT hiker gets helping hands in Bethel

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By Alison Aloisio

A deaf and nearly blind hiker is nearing the end of his 2,185-mile hike of the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine, and several Bethel residents have been helping him out as he approaches his goal.

Roger Poulin of Winthrop, Maine, was born with Usher Syndrome, which affects both vision and hearing and also causes problems with balance. He is blind in one eye and has only tunnel vision in the other.

He set out on his journey more than three years ago, accompanied by Roni Lepore of New Jersey, who serves as what is known as a Special Service Provider.

Like Poulin, Lepore is deaf. They met in 2007 at the Helen Keller National Center in New York while attending a Deaf-Blind Interpreters Training Seminar.

Poulin told Lepore about his dream to hike the AT, and he also said he needed an SSP to go with him. Poulin said he wanted to do the hike in part to show others who are deaf-blind that the dual disability doesn't have to stop them from taking on challenges. Lepore, a hiker herself, agreed to go along.

After doing a lot of research and taking camping classes, the two were prepared for their adventure – and for however long it took them to complete it.

Poulin used trekking poles to help him with his balance, as well as arm and shin guards, safety glasses, gloves and a helmet. Climbing over all the rocks, roots and other obstacles on the trail resulted in frequent falls, and he often ran into low-hanging tree branches.

He communicated with Lepore using American Sign Language. The two went by the trail names “Adventurous Cane” (Poulin) and “Rambling Shamrock.”

Along the way, Poulin said on Friday, they met many hikers who were amazed at his progress. It was slower than what he had first anticipated, however.

“At first, I thought that I could complete it in six to eight months, perhaps nine months (like Bill Irwin – ‘The Blind Courage’),” Poulin said. “When I began hiking from the Springer Mountain, I became frustrated so quickly when I realized that I couldn’t keep up with other hikers and hikers passing me most of the time. I had to change my entire view of the hiking world ... I do not have to force myself to fit with the ‘mold’ of normal and sighted hikers’ ability. I re-framed my thinking by focusing on my needs, well-being, and safety to hike. If I need more time to get through, it is OK. It was not easy in the beginning. Over time, it became easier on me to accept that I hike on my own terms – Deaf-Blind Time (DBT). I give all what I can do to get through in one piece, then I am contented that I know that I do my best to continue with hiking and be patient to reach my dream. I didn’t expect that it would take more than two years, but if it takes four years to do it, then it is OK with me.”

When the pair arrived in Maine in June, the going got tougher.

On Friday Poulin described his experience here in an interview at Bethel Outdoor Adventures, where Jeff and Patti Parsons and Molly Siegel have been among local outdoorspeople providing them with lodging and assistance.

“Maine is very challenging to hike compared to other states that I hiked in,” said Poulin, who signed his description to Lepore, who in turn typed it out on a laptop computer. “On the trail, there are many exposed roots, large-sized boulders, muddy/bog/boreal fields, steep to climb down especially wet and slippery rock/trail. Prior to the White Mountains and Maine, my daily average of miles to hike was between 12 to 15 miles a day. Upon my entrance into the White Mountains and beyond, my daily average dropped to 5 miles a day. By encountering this challenging terrain on the trail, I work hard to negotiate and get through. My body works very hard and I get pretty exhausted by end of day. The weight of my backpack creates another challenge for me to go over the challenging terrain as well due to my balance issue.

“When I first came to Bethel Outdoor Adventure in June, I met Jeffrey and Pattie Parsons. I asked them to shuttle us to the Grafton Notch State Park. My original plan was to hike 95 miles from Grafton Notch State Park to Route 27 in Stratton – around 10 days of hiking.

“I met them again a few weeks later, in July, to inquire where we can find a store to replace my broken bicycle helmet. Somehow, it led us to discuss my AT hiking plans with Jeff and Pattie and all of us got involved to get some help from the Bethel Outdoor Adventure with my hiking challenges.”

Poulin’s original timetable fell by the wayside.

“I had to exit in Andover when I experienced severe case of heartburn and dizzy vision,” he said. “I didn’t expect the terrain to be that daunting. I had to get off the trail to get some rest. We had to change my hiking plans several times and we finally completed our section this past Wednesday, 28-August.”

Poulin got some extra guidance from Siegel and others through the Mahoosuc Notch.

“From Grafton going south, it goes through the Mahoosuc Notch,” said Poulin. “It required special hiking plans since my SSP didn’t feel comfortable going in without support person(s). The blind hiker, Bulldog, in 2010 went through that area and it took him 9.5 hours to get through 1.1 miles of Mahoosuc Notch. With Operation MNOB (Mahoosuc Notch Or Bust) comprised of three hikers (Molly Siegel, Sam Southam, and Paul Austin), we were able to get through without major incident within 4.5 hours.”

Siegel had helped Poulin and Lepore earlier with a re-supply hike. For the Mahoosuc hike, she and the others hiked two miles north on the trail and met the pair headed south.

“Roni let him know if there were dangers,” said Siegel. “We didn’t have to do that much. We took some of their gear.”

To warn Poulin of potential danger, such as a hole, Lepore would tap on one of Poulin’s poles to get his attention and then sign a warning.

Siegel said she enjoyed the unique circumstance of hiking along without a steady chatter among the group, which provided more opportunity to take in the natural surroundings.

She also said she was impressed “at how aware [Poulin] is of his surroundings, how well he uses his poles, and what a good system he and Lepore have to make it all work.”

Poulin and Lepore left Bethel Saturday for the last leg of the hike - 114.5 miles from Route 15 in Monson to the summit of Mt. Katahdin, via the 100-Mile Wilderness.

Poulin was asked what he would do when he finishes his journey.

“People have been asking of me to write a book sharing my experience for the past three years,” he said. “To be frank with you, all I think about is take one thing at a time – to reach the northern terminus of Mt. Katahdin. Once I conquer the Mt. Katahdin, then I can start thinking about how to share my experience with the world. The reason for that is that I sustained an injury to my ribcage that forced me off the trail last July 2012 and ended my hiking season. Therefore, I want to focus on my ‘last haul.’”

He’s grateful to the help he has received while in the Bethel region.

“These folks at the Bethel Outdoor Adventure are like my family!” he said. “I feel very welcome and being part of the community. These people make effort to communicate with me in any way they are able to via paper/pen, smartphone, laptop, email, gesture, etc. I am a lucky man meeting the Parsons and folks of the Bethel Outdoor Adventure and Bethel. They make an impact on my hiking experience by giving me some support. Without them, I may never know how much progress I might have made otherwise in Maine if not for them.”

To follow Poulin and Lepore’s progress on their last leg, see their blog at <http://atdeafblinddream.wordpress.com/>.