Hello there, my trail name is Blossom. Please allow me to have your undivided attention for the next 10 minutes while I tell you a few of my favorite trail stories. You know, a trail has the same structure as a story. There’s a beginning, a middle and an end. What I want to focus on today are the moments in between that teach us life lessons and bring us closer together. First, let’s focus on you for a moment. Go ahead and take a look at the palm of your hand. The lines you see are like trails, right? Some even say these lines tell your entire life story. Now, close your eyes, take a deep breath, and reflect on a memorable moment you’ve had on a trail, any trail. [PAUSE 10 seconds] OK, do I still have your attention? Good. Perhaps a few are the same, but I would bet most of you chose completely different trails from all across the world during that exercise. So, there are many trails out there for us to share experiences with others and learn new lessons, but the trail I’m most familiar with is the Appalachian Trail. All the storytelling I’ve done about my experience on the AT inspired me in my professional life to create a podcast through which to share others’ stories that relate to this iconic scenic trail. First, I'll start with some details about my experience thru hiking the AT.
Let's begin at the end of my own Appalachian Trail story. In the photo on the left you see my fiance Botany proposing to me after spending 2,189.5 miles and 5.5 months in the woods with limited access to showers and food. Can you imagine? I was already in tears having completed this monumental journey and then he adds this into the mix. This was the best day of the trail and my life. This is also when "I" officially became "we." We finished one chapter of a story to start another one. Walking backward from that moment, the second photo is me sitting on the Stratton Mountain Fire Tower in Vermont. I'm sure the history buffs in the room know why this place is so special. This is where the idea for the Appalachian Trail was born. What's interesting to me is that I didn't know that when I snapped this picture. I just felt a natural connection to this place. It means more to me now that I’m back home and working in the outdoor development field. To me, it represents leadership and vision. I reflect on this moment often to keep me focused on my professional goals. It reminds me that I want to make a difference in the world.
Another turning point on my thru-hike, and subsequently my life, was when my fiance and I hiked through our backyard on the AT. Before this journey, I had a bad case of wanderlust. This trip was my chance to find myself and the place I would begin my new life outside of Northeast Tennessee. After 400 miles on the trail, I never imagined feeling as thankful as I did to be home. Look at my face in the photo on the right. That is pure joy to be home, to be in a familiar place, to experience the beauty of this place from a visitor’s perspective. Both literally and figuratively, the trail brought me back home before I even finished it. The photo on the left is another pivotal moment on my hike. This moment could not have happened had I not met Bob Peoples at Kincora Hostel in Hampton, TN. Botany and I were able to paint that white blaze together because Bob invited us to participate in the Kincora Hard Core program. To this day, I imagine that blaze shepherding hikers through the Roan Highlands. And, forever from that moment on, I vowed to be a trail steward.
Upon my return home, I joined the Tennessee Eastman Hiking Club. The greater epiphany is that I realized I want to be a catalyst for change where I have always lived, my home, Northeast Tennessee. I want to share the beauty of my home region with others. I want to invite all of you to come visit and fall in love with Northeast Tennessee. There are so many interesting people living and hiking through there. Now that you’ve heard some of my story, I want to briefly introduce you to a couple of the awesome people who live, work and make Northeast Tennessee such an amazing community to be a part of:
Mountain Squid is probably my most favorite person that lives in Northeast Tennessee. I have a special connection with Squid and I love to tell the story about how we met. When Noah and I first started our thru hike, Squid was the first person we met on our hike. We were dropped off at Forest Service Road 42, .9 mile from Springer. We hiked to the terminus and then back to the road to meet Squid. He was standing there with a notebook and stopped us to ask our names. We told him. Then he asked where we are from. We told him. And, as Noah answered, I looked at Squid’s car and license plate. It read “Carter” which was the county I had been working in as a reporter for the past year and a half. How ironic, huh? I’m on a 2,000+ mile journey and the first person we meet is from back home. More proof that home was calling me back throughout the entire journey.
Where to begin… Chatter is the coolest thru hiker I’ve met since being off the trail. She reminds me of the sense of community that can be found on the trail. I’m so thankful that she crash landed in Johnson City, TN to work for East Tennessee State University’s Outdoor Recreation Department. And, subsequently crashed landed into my life. She is awesome. She solo hiked SOBO. She’s confident and hilarious. The trail take away that she passed along for me to share with you is, “just go with it..” She reminds me to not take life so seriously. Her other piece of advice is just for the ladies... “Wear a skirt so you can pee standing up.” (!)
Butters and Too Sweet are not locals, but they are the kind of folks you want to move to your trail town after their hike. One of my personal favorite memories from recording the podcast is the 5 minutes prior to this photograph. They were the first hikers we interviewed in Erwin, TN at the Great Outdoor Festival. One week later we set up again to record in Roan Mountain, TN. We were about to wrap up for the day when we saw Butters and Too Sweet walking up the driveway at Mountain Harbour. It was one of those magical trail moments and proves that the trail is a conduit for bringing us all together. They remind me so much of my fiance and I having just walked away from the monotony of their lives as accountants to take on this grand journey together.
All of these amazing people and many more are featured on our podcast called ATTN. It stands for Appalachian Trail Tennessee. The podcast is an exercise not only in showcasing our region, but also proving through storytelling that a trail can bring us together and teach us many lessons. The trail bring people together from all walks of life. It levels all the socio-economics of life. The AT Community supports one another no matter what. On the trail, you all have a common goal and it only benefits us all to help one another accomplish that goal. We need more of this in our daily lives both on and off the trails, along all the paths that life leads us down. The podcast is just one of the ways you can get to know the people who hike, live, work and volunteer in my home region. For me, these people are the reasons it is such a special place to live. I’ll speak for the entire community that we’d love for you to come experience this little slice of the AT in betwixt Southwest Virginia and Western North Carolina nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains. If you’re unable to come visit with us, at least you can still listen in with us.
I hope you’ve enjoyed listening to these stories from my time on the AT as well as hearing about some of the awesome people you can learn about through the podcast. Now, think back to those lines on your hand and your own trail stories. I invite you to share your stories with me no matter the trail on which it takes place. Write to me and introduce me to your most favorite person or tell me about any lessons you may have learned while on trail. After all, any trail story is worth attention.