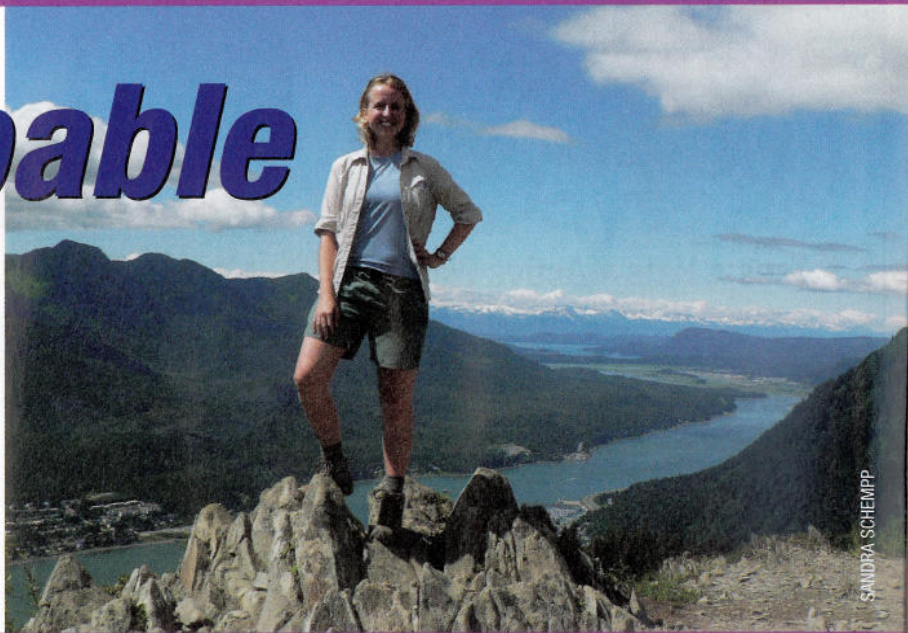


unstoppable

A hiker's lifelong struggle with a crippling disease doesn't keep her from making the ultimate trek—thru hiking the Appalachian Trail.

By *Brianne Goodspeed*



SANDRA SCHEMP

When Sarah Keister stood atop Georgia's Springer Mountain with a plan to walk 2,175 miles to Maine on the Appalachian Trail, she was undeterred by the statistics. Each year, hundreds set out to walk the Trail—which traverses 14 states and requires four to six months to complete—and only about 20 percent reach their goal.

"Things have never been easy in my life," explains Keister, who had little outdoors experience prior to hitting the Appalachian Trail. "It not being easy didn't turn me away. You just have to walk. I could do that."

Walking, however, hasn't always been effortless for the Georgia native who works at an outdoors store in Atlanta. When she was 16 months old, Keister was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, an autoimmune disease that kept her in casts and on medication much of her childhood. Because JRA often occurs in cycles of flare-up and remission, Keister could be a regular kid for months at a time, only to wake up one morning unable to move.

When the disease flared-up during her senior year of high school and doctors recommended steroids, Keister refused. Instead, she ramped up her exercise schedule, which already included playing basketball, and started running five days a week.

"It was tough, but sports provided me with a way to conquer my disease. Being active and happy actually put it into remission," she says.

While she pursued a degree in psychology at Georgia State, Sarah became friends with two former Appalachian Trail thru-hikers. Their stories about the Trail fascinated her.

"I learned from having JRA that I could control my health by staying active, but I wanted to catapult myself to a new level. I needed a new challenge, and the Trail was it. And I wanted to do it solo."

In late February 2004, Keister headed north from Springer Mountain with braces on her knees. The then 23-year-old—whom hikers she met along the way dubbed

"Dragon Slayer"—began by walking eight to 10 miles a day. Before long, she was bagging 20.

The toughest part of the journey came in early April when a late-season snowstorm blew through Tennessee's Roan Highlands, where treeless summits expose hikers to the elements for miles. As she traversed the Roans—at the back of a group of five men—she could hardly see the hiker in front of her. "I had to ask him not to walk too fast because I was afraid I would get lost in the snow, but I also told him not to turn around. I didn't want him to see me cry."

A few weeks later in Virginia, the snow was gone. Keister mailed her knee braces home because "it was too freaking hot." She laughs, "I was going to get dehydrated if I kept those braces on."

When Keister reached Maine's mile-high Katahdin, the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail and the end of her six-and-a-half month journey, she celebrated with a lobster dinner, raspberry beer and a tattoo.

"Hiking the Trail empowered me—not just physically, but psychologically. It made me feel unstoppable," she says.

The next year, Keister returned to her favorite spots along the Trail in North Carolina and helped other hikers by bringing them snacks and giving them rides to the local grocery store. She also had the itch to hike north herself, and ended up joining a group of thru-hikers for a month and a half.

Her return to the Trail was particularly triumphant considering just six months earlier she'd sustained serious injuries in a car accident that doctors predicted would greatly limit her mobility. Again, she proved her doctors wrong.

"I feel so comfortable and at home out there," she says, "and I wanted to know that I was still capable of doing it."

Now 25, Keister, free of JRA symptoms and almost fully recovered from her car accident, encourages other women to hit the trail by teaching clinics.

"I give women the basic principles," she says, "but mostly I tell them that they just need to get out there." 