

Hiker conquers famous Trail

All eyes on

Rick Armstrong

“It’s a thing that happens called trail magic.”

BY CASSANDRA MCCARTY
Staff Reporter

After two years, a severe shin splint injury and several encounters with bears, Kirksville resident Rick Armstrong completed the 2,176-mile journey on the Appalachian Trail this past September.

In April 2006 Armstrong started his hike across the trail, beginning at Springer Mountain in Georgia. Because of an injury, Armstrong was not able to finish the last 300 miles of the trail. He returned to the path this past August, and 38 days later, Armstrong had hiked the entire Appalachian Trail.

In preparation for navigating the trail, Armstrong started training two months before setting out on the path. Armstrong said that whenever he was able to, he would hike around Thousand Hills Park, adding gallons of water as weight. Armstrong said that when he began hiking, he was prepared with the necessary tools but found that he had acquired some surplus items.

“After three days I sent back about four boxes of stuff, and I can’t even remember what was in those four boxes,” Armstrong said.

Despite his preparation, Armstrong said he was unaware of the power that the trail would have.

“It was amazing,” Armstrong said. “I thought I was very prepared for it in training that I did around here in Kirksville, but I really wasn’t. I mean, it’s vast. When you finally get to see some of the vistas — and in ‘06 there was so much rain that I felt like I got ripped off — but when you see mountain range after mountain range and that’s it, it’s awesome.”

Armstrong said the scenery at lower elevations was equally inspiring.

“It’s a very steady hike, and when you are deep into the woods, you know it and you can hear the insects and you are aware of the wind

blowing through the trees — you are aware of what the conditions of the weather are,” Armstrong said. “Sometimes you stop and see the ferns and the moss growing, and the flora of the area is spectacular and the wildflowers were amazing.”

As Armstrong hiked the trail at a steady pace, he acquired the tales and friendship of fellow hikers.

“You know you start by yourself, but when you hike in the trail there is a system that develops with the people, and it’s understanding where the towns are, understanding where the shelters are, understanding what your needs are,” Armstrong said. “People will hike shelter to shelter and next thing you know you are

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in what they call a bubble on the trail, groups of people. You end up meeting oftentimes the same people over and over again, and great friendships are established that way.”

Armstrong said he built many friendships with travelers, especially with two women from England.

“I hiked with two girls from England in ‘06 for six weeks,” Armstrong

said. “We had a great time, we hitchhiked together, we went shopping together, we shared shelters and tents and they were great hiking friends. I will know them for the rest of my life.”

Armstrong said that although he originally went solo for his trek across the 14 states that make up the trail, he came in contact with many other hikers.

“You start by yourself, but you meet a lot of people along the way,” Armstrong said. “When I think about all the people that I met along the trail and people who helped who were perfect strangers, it’s a thing that happens called trail magic.”

Armstrong said that one day on the trail he heard about a family that was in trouble. The son had fallen and broken his arm, and they were in the middle of nowhere. A man



Photo Submitted

Kirksville resident Rick Armstrong completed the 2,176-mile Appalachian Trail this September. He trained for two months prior to his hike and completed the Trail in 38 days.

appeared and offered the family his car. He told them that he was going to take pictures of the autumn scenery and to pick him up four or five hours later when they were done at the hospital.

“Trail magic, things just happen,

they just happen,” Armstrong said. “And I have seen it enough, heard about it happen enough, have [had] it happen enough, too.”

The 2,176-mile expedition across 14 states may be a lonely struggle for many wanderers through the vast

woods and mountains, yet within the quiet sounds of nature, each hiker has his or her own story to share.

“Everybody has a different story about why they hike the trail,” Armstrong said. “It just depends on what motivated them.”

Sense overlap provides unique perspective

BY CHRIS BONING
Staff Reporter

Most people would not identify the sound of an espresso machine with the colors red, pink and orange, but sophomore Heather Talpers is not like most people.

Talpers is a synesthete, meaning that two or more of her senses fuse in a unique way — for example, she sees colors when she hears sounds — in response to a specific stimulus. An estimated one in 200 people experience this phenomenon, which is known in the medical community as synesthesia.

Talpers said she also perceives printed numbers and letters as having specific colors, physically feels the sounds of certain musical instruments and associates color with some strong scents.

She said her synesthesia has been useful for memorizing vocabulary and mathematical formulas — she remembers the color sequence — but the constant stimulation sometimes can be distracting.

“It all depends on what you attend to,” Talpers said. “There’s color all over [the Student Union Building], but that doesn’t mean that I can’t attend to what [someone is] saying. It’s just like if there’s a TV — there’s a stimulus, and it’s producing sound, but you’re doing something else — you’re not attending to it. ... It might distract you a little.”

She also said her synesthesia caused problems when she was a child because another side effect is associating colors with the personalities

of people she knows well.

“My best friend, she’s like a [red],” Talpers said. “I don’t know why, that’s just what she is. I can’t rationalize it, and a lot of times when I was a kid ... I didn’t want to be friends with people who were orange or yellow because I didn’t like those colors. I liked green and pink and blue, so I tried to be friends with kids who were green or blue.”

When she was a child she also didn’t realize that other people weren’t experiencing the same things she was until one of her friends gave her a book that included a character with similar experiences, she said.

She said her mother also has synesthesia, and she too was unaware that she had it for most of her childhood.

“The reason I thought that everyone else had it or assumed that everyone else had it [was because my mother and I] had a conversation when I was about 10 maybe, and she said that she really hated this number, 47,” Talpers said. “[She said], ‘This is the ugliest number, I hate it.’ And I agreed with her. I don’t know if it’s coincidence that we both don’t like that number because of the color sequence — it’s different colors [for each of us] — but we just don’t like the way it looks. ... I assumed everyone was like that.”

Professor of music Thomas Trimbom has a mild form of synesthesia, and, like Talpers, sees color when he listens to music.

“Being a conductor and working with musical groups, very often ... as I’m hearing sounds, I’m see-

ing color at the same time,” he said. “It’s hard to describe that, but oftentimes ... I’ll talk in musical terms, but I’ll often express it in terms of, ‘This has got to be more blue or more red.’”

Trimbom also said symphonic music is the genre that most frequently sparks his synesthesia.

“When there is a lot of variation to be had, it tends to trigger it more than when I hear a mass sound, although when I hear a pipe organ, for instance, there are times when that will just trigger off a color, and that’s sort of a coordinated mass of sound,” he said.

Trimbom said his synesthesia started developing intensively when he became increasingly involved with music as a teenager.

“Art has always been a strong second love of mine, and so expressing artistically on paper or in music, it just didn’t seem to matter — I needed to do both of them,” he said. “The color relationship just seemed to strengthen.”

He said that so far he hasn’t met anyone who shares his ability to visualize music but partly because it’s not something that comes up in conversation.

“The connection between art and music, the actual doing of art and music is not all that strange,” Trimbom said. “There are a lot of well-known artists [who] have this. George Gershwin was a wonderful painter, [and] Tony Bennett is a wonderful artist. ... These things do happen much more readily than you would think, but the person is so well-known for one thing the

[synesthesia] doesn’t even come up.”

Peter Grossenbacher, American Synesthesia Association board member and associate professor of contemplative psychology at Naropa University in Boulder, Colo., said synesthesia frequently is mistaken as the replacement for a stimulus, but actually it is an addition to the senses.

He said that synesthesia is thought to be caused by an overlap in the brain’s visual, audio, etc. pathways, which in turn over-stimulates the brain and generates additional sensory experiences, such as smelling colors. Normally, the brain has safeguards put in place to prevent this overlap of information, but these safeguards apparently are absent or not as powerful in synesthetes, Grossenbacher said.

He added that the fact that certain drugs can induce synesthesia proves that synesthetes do not have any additional wiring or hardware in their brains.

“We don’t think that just from taking a drug [that] new connections in the brain are formed or new pathways are created or anything like that,” Grossenbacher said. “Rather, we just think [of it as] an alteration in the patterns of communication among existing networks and pathways [in the brain].”

He said these drugs can make the brain temporarily lose its ability to control sensory information. For people with synesthesia, this seems to be a natural, everyday occurrence.

“[Synesthetes’] brains are organized the same way as non-synesthetes, but the pathways are used differently,” Grossenbacher said.

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