

Outdoors



The high road

What the wilderness taught me

Photos courtesy of Phil Carlstedt

Above: Jessica Stugelmayer and Phil Carlstedt hike along the Pacific Crest Trail through the Goat Rocks Wilderness in southern Washington with Mount Rainier looming in the background.

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The rain came down in torrents, each drop stinging my already cold skin. “I can’t cross it without getting wet,” I shouted, trying to be heard over the thunderous rush of water streaming in front of me. “I have to change shoes.”

What would have been a milky stream on a normal summer day had turned into a treacherous tirade pouring down from glaciers above. Across the raging whitewater, I saw where the trail carried on, nearly 200 feet from where I was standing on the boulder-strewn bank.

I set my pack down and it squished into the mud under its own weight as I changed into my Chaco sandals. My waterlogged toes looked like a child’s wrinkled fingers after a long bath, and the duct tape protecting the blisters on each of my toes had begun to curl as it peeled away from my skin.

Once I had reassembled my pack and hoisted it to where it had formed into the curvature of my back, I assessed the situation. Most of the pools were too deep for me to wade through and one misstep would overthrow my top-heavy load and I would easily be rushed downstream, head held under water.

The only solution was to climb higher to find a shallower pool to enter the unrelenting barrage of liquid. I led the way, climbing on all fours up jagged mounds of rock. I hit a roadblock when I reached a boulder whose flat face I couldn’t ascend.

“Phil, I’m going to need you to push the back of my pack while I climb up,” I said.

He nodded in agreement. I stepped as high on the rock as I could.

“On three. One... two... three!”

I pushed through my toes and Phil shoved me from behind. Suddenly, I knew it was going to end badly. I felt my foot slide out from beneath me and the combined weight of my pack and my body slammed against the rock with all of the impact taken in by my right shin.

The river drowned out my screams.

Six months earlier, my boyfriend Phil and I began planning what we dubbed our “grand adventure.”

I was set to graduate college in May and had no plans after graduation. There was no time like the present.

The Pacific Crest Trail is a 2,650-mile trek that beckons hundreds of wanderers and adventurers every year. While most people only know of its existence due to the best-selling book “Wild,” the PCT appeals to a different kind of trekker than its sibling the Appalachian Trail.

Rugged terrain and remote wilderness set miles from

Months went by as we researched, stockpiled and invested in gear, food and the logistics of our expedition. Everything had been planned, down to the number of miles we were going to hike a day, the number of calories we would burn, the number of calories we would eat, how many squares of toilet paper we would need.

I could only tell I was crying when I tasted my brackish tears. Droplets streamed down my face, thunder rumbled and lightning cracked across the gray sky.

I dragged my battered body up the rock and looked down at my shin, where a stream of blood flowed from multiple places in my broken skin.

Phil examined my wound, brow furrowed.

As my heart pumped and adrenaline drove through my veins, I knew I had to keep moving. Stopping wasn’t an option. We were miles from any paved roads, within one of the most remote sections of the entire PCT.

“I have to keep going now or we won’t get across,” I said, stating what we both already knew. “We have to get across.”

Phil nodded in agreement and we stepped into the unremitting current.

I can’t be sure how long it took us to cross the river, but we did. I don’t know how many blisters welled up on my feet, but I kept walking. I don’t know how many times I wanted to quit, but I didn’t.

Usually when everything is out of your control, you have two options. You can give up, or you can adapt.

In the wilderness, you must adapt. You have no choice.

In our tech-savvy world, everything bends to our will. We control every aspect of our lives with the click of a button or the touch of a screen. Each of us is a society-made control freak.

In all the years of my young life, I had been on a single path with blinders up. Graduate high school, go to college, graduate college, find a career, follow said career and make a living.

Life isn’t a straight path. It is the trail winding up and down glaciated canyon walls, twisting along a knife-edge ridge, and chock full of spur trails that lead into the woods.

It is only when you loosen your grip on control and adapt that you can let yourself fully explore the trail.

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civilization characterize the trail. Not for the faint of heart, climbs can last for miles while hikers climb 5,000 feet, only to drop 3,000 feet and begin another 2,000-foot ascent all in the same day.

Daunting as it may be, some choose to attempt to hike the entire thing. These “thru-hikers” can take between three and six months to complete the journey. Phil and I didn’t have six months to give, so we decided to start with a smaller chunk: the 512-mile Washington section.

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