

I have wanted to hike the Appalachian trail for many years. At my home in northern Vermont, where I lived for the first 18 years of my life before I graduated from high school, I grew up surrounded by natural beauty, tranquility, and simplicity. I am now a second year college student, but my upbringing has continued to deeply influence my attitude towards everything I do. My love for adventure and intense physical exercise is a large part of why I plan to thru-hike the Appalachian trail this summer.

I have been hiking all my life; my home in Vermont is inaccessible by car and my family walks a third of a mile uphill from where we park our vehicles to reach our house. We grow a majority of the food that we eat in our vegetable gardens. Due to our limited solar electricity supply and lack of Internet or television, time outside was always an important part of my daily life at home – whether working in my family's extensive vegetable gardens, running along a trail in the woods, or cross-country skiing along the ridge behind my house. Since the youngest days of my childhood, my parents taught me to value time spent outside. I have countless memories of going apple picking with my dad before kindergarten, of learning how to make jam with my mom, and of hiking or skiing up mountains near my home with my parents and sister. In middle and high school, I became very involved with nordic skiing, running, and hiking. When I was 13, I went for a three day hike with a friend during which we hiked off trail between our two houses; in order to finish we had to hike for 12-14 hours a day, never quite sure of our location. In high school, I competed on my school's varsity Cross Country Running and Nordic Ski teams, and during my junior year I completed the Craftsbury Marathon (classic skiing). When I was 18 I hiked the Long Trail, finishing in 3 weeks.

It would be hard to choose a favorite adventure, since I have had so many adventurous experiences that I value greatly. After graduating from high school, I took a gap year and lived in Oaxaca, Mexico for 10 months, working on service and independent study projects through a grant from a scholarship. I had studied abroad in Oaxaca in high school through the support of the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation, and although I had a few friends I went to Oaxaca without my plans completely determined. By the end of the year I had an extraordinary group of friends and acquaintances, who remain extremely important in my life. Through study of the Zapotec language and internships with various nonprofit organizations, I made extraordinary connections with families and communities. In addition, I explored the Valley of Oaxaca and the surrounding mountains through mountain biking. I made dozens of friends through the numerous mountain biking clubs in Oaxaca city and I went for long bike rides on the weekends, often 100+ kilometers with large amounts of elevation gain. I began to compete in races with a local team, and although I have continued biking at Harvard I miss mountain biking in the rugged Oaxacan landscape.

Last summer, after my first year of college, I spent 15 weeks working as a field assistant on Middleton Island, Alaska. I worked in a crew of 5 people on long-term seabird monitoring projects. We would often spend the whole day outside in very wet, cold conditions. Spending the whole summer on a small isolated uninhabited island was an amazing experience, although the work hours were long and demanding. I especially appreciated the opportunity to thoroughly explore the island over the course of the summer. I walked the full tideline (18 miles) three times, once at night around summer solstice. I walked the beach in sections countless times and experienced the full passing of the spring and summer on the island. I really enjoyed becoming so grounded in the landscape and environment of the island. Wherever I am I seek ways to explore the surrounding environment; I value being aware of and familiar with my surroundings, and connecting with the landscapes and people around me.

I am now a second year college student at Harvard University. I am planning to take a year off from school between my sophomore and junior years of college, and I plan to leave to hike the Appalachian trail within a few days of finishing classes this semester in May. I am planning to take around 4.5 months to hike the trail (and will have 2-3 weeks of spare time to finish before it is too late in the season, in case of unexpected delays). Hiking the AT to me means the opportunity to focus entirely on physical and emotional achievement and reflection, a rare opportunity in the academically intensive environment of Harvard. In addition, it will allow me to make friendships and connect with others in a very different way than I do at college. I am still in touch with several friends I met during my Long Trail Hike, and I found the social aspect of a trail hike to be very special. After completing the Appalachian Trail, I plan to work several months on a field biology job and afterwards return to Oaxaca, Mexico to begin thesis research before beginning my third year at Harvard. Taking a year off is important to me because it will help me become more grounded in my interests and research before I begin my junior year at college. It will also give me time for personal and social growth in a non-academic environment. I feel that hiking the Appalachian Trail will be the perfect way to start my year off with a huge physical and personal challenge, and it is also a journey I have wanted to complete for many years.

At school I work out regularly – I train with the Harvard Cycling Team, I run several times a week in addition to swimming and resistance training, and I often nordic ski on weekends. I ran a half marathon in November and am planning to run 1-2 half marathons during spring semester. To prepare for the Appalachian trail, I will continue a very consistent work out schedule while at school, and will go for several weekend training trips to test my gear (probably to the White Mountains in New Hampshire). I will start with lower mileage at the beginning of the trail to avoid injury and work up gradually to 17-18 miles average per day, with lower mileage in the most difficult sections. My parents are very supportive of my plans, and my father will drive me to the start of the trail in Georgia.

I am in the lowest income category at Harvard and am a Jack Kent Cooke Scholar (a nationwide scholarship for low income students). I work 10-20 hours a week during the school year and also usually work during summer breaks in order to cover personal expenses. Harvard and the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation have been extremely generous, allowing me to pursue projects and interests that would have been impossible otherwise. However, it is difficult to find funding opportunities for activities during a year off. Although I do not plan to spend much time in trail towns on the Appalachian Trail (I will return to the trail to camp at night when I need to enter towns to resupply), the cost of food and gear for the hike is substantial. Receiving support for my Appalachian Trail thru hike would allow me to purchase good quality, light gear, which would help me avoid injury and hike the necessary mileage to finish the trail before Mount Katahdin closes in October. It would also help me cover food costs to complete the hike with fewer financial concerns – I plan to work during most of my year off but saving enough money to cover the full costs of my Appalachian Trail hike before I begin working will be difficult. I would value joining the Flyin Ryan community focused on values of adventure, connecting with others and with my surroundings, and personal and social growth, all of which are important parts of my life. I greatly value my family, since growing up in an isolated home in Vermont has shaped who I am – even though my time at home is now very limited, I take full advantage of the time I have. I also greatly value my diverse friendships – in Vermont, at Harvard, in Oaxaca, and from other parts of my life. I work hard to maintain friendships with the many people who are important to me. I constantly try to build time into my life to simply talk with and connect with people I care about, even though this can be difficult in the intensely busy environment of college life. I especially value building and maintaining friendships with people who have very different backgrounds and life experiences from me. I work to share my love for adventure with others – many friends from Harvard who have spent little time outside of cities have visited me at home and I have enjoyed bringing them on short hikes or teaching them how to nordic ski.

Self sufficiency is very important to me and I feel that in some ways it has become more difficult for me to be self sufficient as a college student. Growing up in a very isolated home with no internet or road access and very limited electricity, my life in high school was focused around my family and home. I was deeply connected with my family's land and I sometimes miss this feeling of groundedness at college. However, I work to constantly connect with my surroundings, both social and physical, wherever I am. Finally, adventure and hard work are essential parts of my life and shape everything I do. A large amount of personal motivation and independent hard work allowed me to go from a public school in northern Vermont to an elite university; a desire for adventure and a lack of fear for trying new or difficult things has allowed me to have such diverse experiences as working as a field assistant in Alaska and building friendships in indigenous communities in Oaxaca. I hope that the Appalachian trail will be my next big adventure, and I look forward to the diverse landscapes and experiences it will bring.



Crossing a marsh during an off-trail backpacking trip in high school

Mountain biking in Oaxaca



Giving an English class in Oaxaca



Heading off on a winter camping trip during winter break at home





Bringing a friend from Harvard on a hike during a visit home



Working with a tufted puffin on Middleton Island, Alaska



Dressed in traditional dress with friends from a Zapotec community in Oaxaca, Mexico