

## Zoe O'Neill Flyin Ryan Personal Essay

This scholarship would greatly impact my adventure on the Pacific Crest Trail in the spring of 2025. I plan to begin the trail on May 26th and finish by October 26th. Over the course of five months, I will hike more than 2,600 miles, from Mexico to Canada, through California, Oregon, and Washington. I'm undertaking this challenge as a way to reward myself after years of hard work in college. Having spent the past five summers hiking, I've fallen in love with backpacking and the trail lifestyle. I wanted to do something big—something that would help me build even more confidence and give me a sense of adventure. I want to return with incredible stories to tell, a life lived on the trail, and an even deeper sense of who I am.

I am currently a senior in the Occupational Therapist Assistant program at Madison Area Technical College. I chose this program because it allows me to help people do what they love and prioritize what matters most to them. A huge part of that is helping people move their bodies, become more independent, and live fulfilling lives. Being in the OTA program has made me more outspoken, outgoing, and confident in who I am and how I present myself.

One of my greatest accomplishments was completing the Manong trail on Isle Royale National Park with my mom. We began the hike with great enthusiasm, but on the third day, we were caught in a torrential downpour. We were exhausted from 9 hours of walking in torrential rain and lots of elevation. We recovered that night and continued on to the Manong, one of the hardest trails in the Midwest. The trail is rugged, with constant elevation changes and a lack of clear path markers. In addition to the tough terrain, we had to deal with relentless rain, making the trail slippery and treacherous. After a day to rest, we pressed on, navigating through high ridges and thick forest. On the final day, we tackled a 14-mile section with no breaks, and after a few miles, we found ourselves following a moose track, unsure of our exact location. With only a compass and a map, we spent over four hours bushwhacking through swampy, dense vegetation before finally finding the trail again. This experience was a huge learning moment for me. It taught me that if I could overcome such a stressful situation with limited resources, I could handle nearly anything that came my way.

So far, my favorite adventure has been in Isle Royale National Park, where I hiked the longest and most challenging route I've ever attempted. After over a year of planning, my mom and I spent 16 days backpacking across the island, covering distances of 7-16 miles per day, for a total of over 125 miles. We encountered the most wildlife I've ever seen, including a cow and calf moose, as well as four wolves and several foxes. My favorite place on the island is Moskey Basin, a campsite where we often took "zero days" to slow down and soak in the beauty of our surroundings. It's a place that taught me to stop, breathe, and simply be present.

My greatest mentors have been my parents and professors. My dad, who has always been passionate about the outdoors, introduced me to hiking and camping. Many of my best childhood memories are of trips to national parks with him. My mom has been an incredible role model, showing me the strength and independence that women can embody. She's joined me on many

recent hikes and has been a constant source of support and inspiration. She's taught me to always pursue my goals, even if it means doing so alone, and to never settle for less than what I truly want. My professors in the OTA program have also been instrumental in shaping my personal and professional growth. They've shown me the importance of maintaining my own interests and hobbies while also helping others become more independent and engaged in their own lives.

Ryan's core principles resonate with me deeply. As someone who is immersed in nature, passion drives my love for the outdoors. I embrace the challenges of the trail with a focus on self-sufficiency and helping others. These principles align with the values I practice through the Leave No Trace guidelines, which I follow to keep the wilderness pristine for future hikers. The values Ryan promotes not only inspire me to enjoy nature but also help me grow as an individual.

To prepare for the Pacific Crest Trail, I've relied on my prior hiking experience. I understand the mental and physical demands of long-distance hiking, and I've taken steps to stay fit and organized. I've also met with a previous PCT hiker who completed the trail in 2024. Over coffee, we discussed her experiences, and she answered many of my questions. I feel confident that I have the experience and preparation necessary for this journey.

My parents have been incredible supporters of my passion for adventure. They introduced me to the outdoors early on, taking us to national parks and on backpacking trips across the country. I've had experiences that many people never get, like scuba diving and hiking in remote areas, all thanks to their guidance. They taught me that women are strong, capable, and independent. They continue to support me emotionally, always having my back, no matter what.

Completing the Pacific Crest Trail will be a personal milestone, one that will teach me even more about myself. I am eager to take on this challenge, knowing that the lessons I learn on the trail will stay with me for the rest of my life. Whether on the trail or in my career as an occupational therapy assistant, I will use these lessons to help others live more independent, meaningful lives.