

## Did I Really Hike the Appalachian Trail? by Jennifer Audette

I am finally giving myself some time to process my very first hike this summer.

Throwing myself right back into car rider lines, fixing school lunches and work plus taking a red-eye flight back to Florida didn't allow much time for reflection or personal celebration – beyond the hug and knuckles my 11-year-old son and I exchanged and one exhaustive and grateful drop to the ground upon safely returning to our campsite.

When a friend – a sophisticated world traveler - came up to me a few weeks ago and said, “I still can't believe the hiking trip you took. That was so brave,” I realized I never got to sit back and say, “I did it!”

**I DID IT!**

I still don't know how. The odds were so very much against us.

- We almost missed our flight to Virginia. I left my cell phone at home and had to go back to get it. We were still standing in the TSA line 30 minutes before our flight was to take off and the line was growing long and sluggish. I was trying not to freak out. All of a sudden, a Tsa Checkpoint - Orlando International Airport (MCO) officer stepped in and rerouted all the passengers to bypass the whole taking-off-shoes check, and before we knew it, we were sitting on the plane ordering coffee and chocolate milk.
- I'd never hiked or camped before. As in never ever. A cabin at sleepaway camp is the closest experience for me. So we practiced opening and pitching a tent at home. We worked out. I read books and websites. I researched this trip like none other. I was constantly (obsessively) reading about tick bite prevention and what to do if we encountered a bear. No amount of reading or rehearsing fully prepares you for what you are about to experience in nature though.
- Uber app was not my friend. Because we were flying into the Charlottesville Albemarle Airport, we'd need a taxi ride to and from the Loft Mountain Campground site, about an hour away. Because there was no cell coverage in the mountains, I wanted to book both my arriving ride and return ride in advance, but the Uber app on my particular phone didn't offer that functions. After many emails and Tweets with Uber, my husband just added me to his Uber account and he could always call for a ride at the agreed-upon time and location. Thankfully, we had a great Uber driver on the way in who offered to pick us up on his own time. Done.
- I had to throw out my bear spray. Twelve hours before our flight, it occurred to me that while we were being meticulous about how many ounces our bug spray and toothpaste weighed to get through TSA, I never checked to see if my peace-of-mind bear deterrent spray would make it through. With severe reluctance, I removed it from my backpack and said farewell as I set it on the dining room table.
- I lost my maps. I am so directionally challenged that my biggest fear was getting lost, bigger than being attacked by bears, ticks or snakes. I had packed three different maps, including one

that detailed and highlighted the three day hikes we planned to take. I put the maps and guidebook down to adjust my backpack at the airport and I never picked them back up.

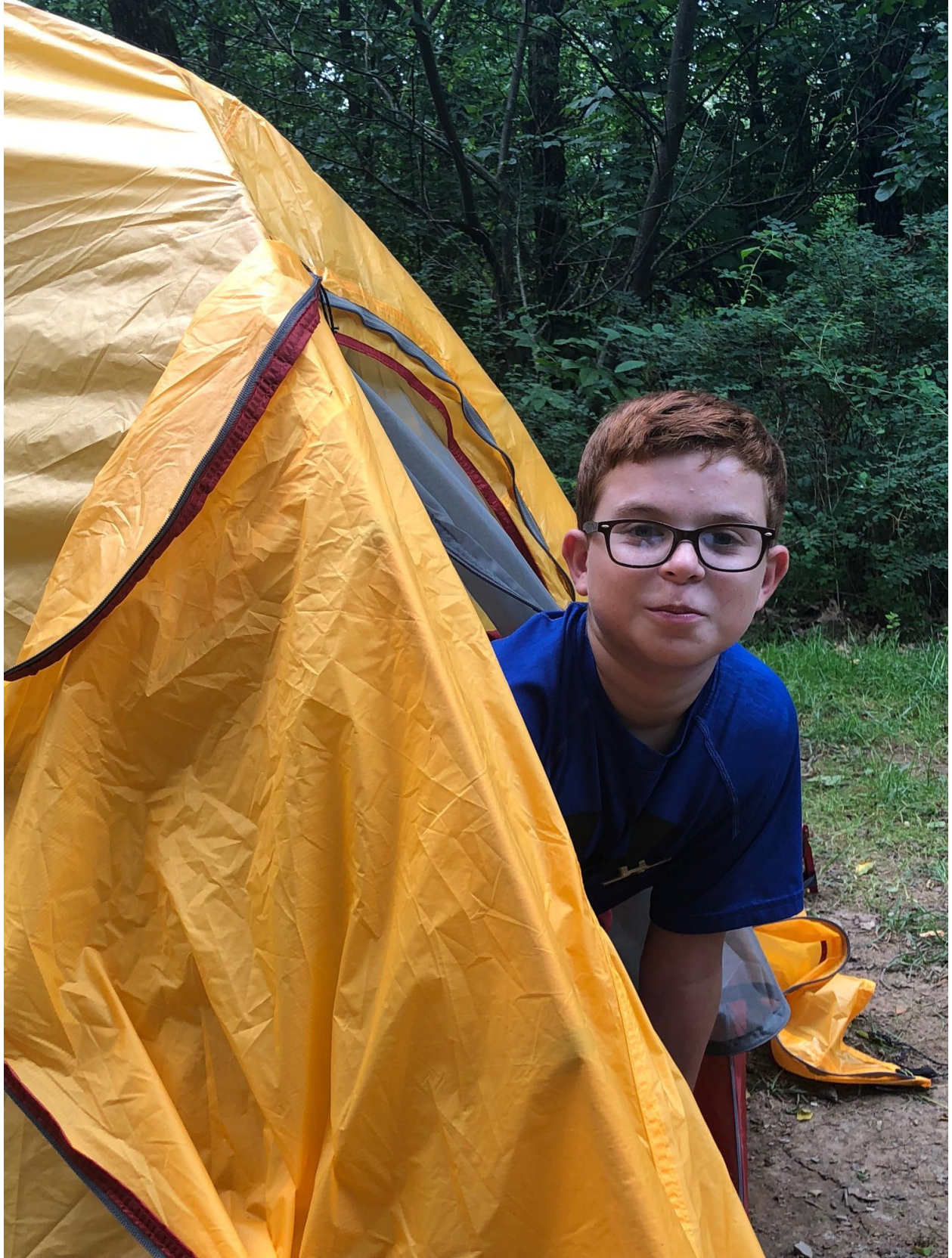
- Our food was stolen. We packed enough food in our backpacks to last us the three days, but it was stolen from communal food storage bins.
- Josh panicked. Halfway through our day hike to a nearby waterfall, we came upon a sign warning us that bears were active in that area. It was at the start of a trailhead, but it was the middle of our hike so our eyes grew wide and our hearts started beating fast. Should we continue on? Was a waterfall worth the risk? Josh's indecisiveness almost convinced me to turn around. But I told him let's go, this is what we came for and this is what we were going to see.
- Our first attempt at a day hike right after we arrived and pitched our tent was foiled and my son seemed frustrated and maybe a little homesick and losing faith. He said he wanted to go home as we fell asleep the first night. He was the impetus for the hike, as he really wanted to be a part of our friends' five-month hike on the Pacific Coast Trail. This was the next best hike I could offer, so I needed to step up our game the next day and teach him how fun hiking in the mountains would be and that peaceful doesn't have to mean boring.

But when it comes down to it, you don't need most of what I mentioned. It's just you, the sky and the land. You don't need showers, or bear spray, or maps. The food magically reappeared that night – minus a chocolate bar or two. It rained – OK, it poured -- and this city girl knew exactly what to do. We never got wet. That's an incredible feeling to know there is one piece of fabric between you and a downpour – and you were the one who “built” that shelter.

We didn't ever get lost. We only once didn't go far enough and gave up too early. That feeling never left us, by the way – the notion that maybe we'd gone too far or missed a turn. When you start trusting your instincts and start getting a feel for how long a mile is for your pace, the journey becomes smoother and more predictable.

We had such great conversations. Like meaningful, undivided attention. That never happens these days. Even if it's not electronics distracting us, there's laundry to do, dinner to make and other people (and pets) who need attention and care. We talked about what kind of berries we saw, how the gigantic trees had possibly fallen, the elevation, the chipmunks, the sounds we heard, the deer who visited our campsite, and when we would take our next drink stop. Josh kept telling me, “It really IS about the journey, Mom.”

As cliché as it is, he is right. The willpower that brought us to the Appalachian Trail and the faith that helped us survive for 72 hours with nothing but the packs on our back and the heads that are on our shoulders were stronger than any elevation or distance we covered.









## More about Jennifer:

Jennifer Audette has lived in Polk County for more than 24 years.

She spent her childhood in Miami, where she held local, regional and international leadership roles in her Kadima and United Synagogue youth groups. She also served in the temple's choir and worked as a bar mitzvah tutor.

A graduate of the University of Florida, Jennifer served as a Sunday School teacher at B'nai Israel in Gainesville and Editor-in-Chief of the *Jewish Student News*.

After earning her Bachelor of Science degree in Journalism, Jennifer worked as a reporter for the *Miami Jewish Tribune/Broward Jewish World/Palm Beach Jewish World*. She also enjoyed serving in her spare time as a USY advisor in Miami, Tampa and Lakeland for many years.

Jennifer spent 22 years as a newspaper reporter and editor at the *News Chief* and *The Ledger*. She currently handles public relations, social media and event planning for Lakeland Regional Health. Over the last 10 years, Jennifer has enjoyed writing travel stories and blog posts for organizations like Visit Florida, Where Orlando, Rosen Hotels and Visit Pasco. She is currently working on a children's book, "Phil and His Home Plate Luck," a semi-fictional account of a Jewish boy growing up in 1950s Miami Beach.

In 2001, Jennifer was honored as Temple Emanuel's Woman of the Year. She lives in Lakeland with her husband, Scott and two sons, Victor and Joshua.