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'Life's not over just because you lose a leg,' says Appalachian Trail hiker

By CATHY DYSON THE FREE LANCE-STAR Sep 30, 2017



Tim Martin of Stafford is hiking the Appalachian Trail. Martin, who spent 12 years as a Fredericksburg firefighter and paramedic, has hiked more than two-thirds of the trail and plans to leave this week to hike from Georgia to Maryland.

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When hikers reach the northernmost summit of the Appalachian Trail, they can breathe in the beautiful scenery before them, ponder the arduous journey behind them—and maybe rub their legs in relief.

Not Tim Martin.

After he scaled Mount Katahdin, the highest point in Maine, he took off his prosthetic leg and raised it in the air. The look on his face shows both triumph and defiance, perhaps toward those who wonder why a man with one leg would attempt to traverse the 2,190-mile Appalachian Trail alone.

Martin wanted to prove that anything is possible.

"Life's not over just because you lose a leg," said the Stafford County resident, who turned 55 while walking through Vermont. "There are so many things you can do."

He hopes to inspire other amputees to take on the challenge of hiking through 14 states and eight different national forests—or to embrace whatever athletic challenges interest them.

Based on comments from others who know him, as well as hikers who gave him a thumbs-up and said "more power to you," his determination is inspiring.

"When he gets something in his head, he is going to do it, no matter what," said Jay Skinner, who has known Martin for 30 years. "He has absolutely no fear. I know that may sound reckless, but in Tim's case, it's always an 'informed risk.' He will research and study whatever is in front of him and never goes into anything blindly."

Martin calls his friend Skinner a chatterbox, and it's clear that Martin doesn't take after him. He's a man of few words, especially about the accident that claimed his leg.

It's not that he doesn't want to relive the painful memories; he just figures, what's the point?

He had been a paramedic and firefighter with the Fredericksburg Fire Department for 12 years when he was doing some tree-trimming as a side job in August 2000. He accidentally cut his safety line and plummeted 30 feet to the ground.

"I tried to stand up," he said. "I knew it was bad."

Big understatement.

There were more than 90 fractures between both legs. After almost a year's worth of treatments and procedures, he was fed up with the ongoing pain and swelling on his left side.

"You know doctors," he said. "They do everything they can to save life and limb, but sometimes you gotta let things go, let limbs go. It is what it is."

'KICKSTAND' IS OFF

Ten months after the fall, Martin's left leg was amputated below the knee. His right ankle had been fused together to the point there's little flexibility. Martin says he's "got the gas pedal" movement, but not much else.

Once Martin was fitted with a prosthetic leg, he started resuming all the activities he did before he was sidelined. Always the outdoorsy type, he continued to hunt and hike, ride mountain bikes and motorcycles.

Years earlier, when he and Skinner worked together as firefighters, they joined the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club, which maintains paths in the Shenandoah National Park. They spent hours keeping their section of Bearfence Trail in shape.

That's when the idea of hiking the AT first popped into Martin's head—and he figured it was about time he did it.

On the trail, hikers tend to earn nicknames based on a physical feature or habit. The name "Stumbelina" speaks for itself. So does "Gray Beard" or "Scallywag," for someone who wore a pirate bandanna all the time.

Martin was "Kickstand" for the way he'd take off his prosthetic leg, stand it up and rest his stump on it.

'MAMMOTH UNDERTAKING'

Martin hasn't completed the AT; he did about 1,700 miles from Harpers Ferry, W.Va., to the northernmost peak in Maine from April 30 through Sept. 14. He had to take a break to do some house projects and spend time with his wife, Kristine.

He plans to get back on the trail this week; he'll start at Springer Mountain, Ga., and go north to Damascus, Md.

Hikers can travel north to south, south to north, start in the middle and leapfrog to another stretch.

“As long as you cover every mile of the trail within a year, you’re considered a thru-hiker,” Martin said.

Each year, thousands attempt what the Appalachian Trail Conservancy calls a “mammoth undertaking,” but only one in four makes it.

Odds are, not too many of them have an artificial leg.

Martin covers an average of 20 miles a day and prefers to walk alone because of his inconsistent pace. He can book it uphill, but has to put on the brakes going down. The artificial foot tends to pitch forward with the toe, meaning he could easily propel himself into a somersault if he didn’t watch it, said Greg Wright of Mobility Prosthetics and Orthotics.

Wright fitted Martin with his artificial limb 16 years ago and employs Martin as a subcontractor who does everything from landscaping to helping rebuild parts in prosthetics.

Wright even watched Martin put on his spikes and climb the trees around Wright’s new office. He watched Martin start at the top, take down branches as he descended and eventually fell the trees without a problem.

“I was impressed,” Wright said. “There’s not much he can’t do.”

‘A PRETTY GOOD LIFE’

For certain, hiking 2,190 miles is no easy task for anyone. Amputees have to monitor their “residual limb,” or stump, because it shrinks and swells with use. They also have to be careful to avoid excess moisture, bruises and blisters on the residual limb, Wright said.

Meanwhile, the other leg is doing 60 to 70 percent of the work of walking “so you’re still taking a beating on that sound limb,” Wright said.

Martin had to get off the trail for four days in Connecticut after he developed cellulitis, a potentially dangerous skin infection. Ingrown hairs got infected after extreme humidity, coupled with exertion, soaked his clothes. Moisture built up in the liner between his leg and prosthetic, and an infection raged in his stump.

Martin reluctantly dragged himself to a nearby town and sought medical help.

That was by far the worst incident. He tripped over fallen trees a couple times when he was checking maps, had a busted lip and developed trench foot from the excessive humidity.

“I’ve been pretty much injury-free,” he said.

He looks forward to doing the final leg of the trail during fall, his favorite time of year. After a two-week hiatus in the Fredericksburg area, he’s also eager to get back to the more peaceful atmosphere of the trail.

“It’s hard to come back to this. People are inconsiderate, just racing about and flicking their cigarettes everywhere,” Martin said. “On the trail, they think about other people, each other. Everybody’s got that common goal of finishing the trail. It’s a pretty good life.”

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