

We are often asked, “So, when did you decide to be a lawyer?” I made that decision while on a long walk. A really long walk. When I set out from Springer Mountain, Georgia with my older brother on March 12, 2000 to hike the Appalachian Trail, law school was nowhere on my radar. I gave up my editing job, girlfriend, dog, and apartment, and started walking north, with no idea of what I would be doing 2,167.2 miles later.

I was well into Pennsylvania and more than halfway along my “thru-hike” by the time I thought about the future. On the A.T., the future is a nebulous thing. It lies somewhere north, beyond Mt. Katahdin in central Maine. Many of us had no idea how it would look, we just knew that we’d get there eventually. Our focus was more immediate: how many miles today? Do I have enough food? Can that horrible stench possibly be me? For me, the future started with a phone call to a friend who was then a 1L at Vermont Law. After a short conversation about how much she loved law school, my mind was off to the races.

In “normal” life, the seed of an idea tends to get lost in the chaos and clutter of the day-to-day. On the A.T., ideas tend to grow and multiply at an unnatural rate and without boundaries. By New York, law school was a possibility. In Massachusetts, I hitched a ride to Boston and wandered the halls of Harvard Law, feeling not a bit out-of-place in my dirty clothes, long hiker hair and scruffy beard (thru-hikers have the unique ability to feel perfectly comfortable in places where they are obviously not welcome). By Vermont, I was researching law schools at public libraries. In New Hampshire, my parents sent an LSAT prep book with my resupply box. And finally, in the 100-Mile Wilderness of Maine, I could have been seen answering LSAT sample questions next to a campfire, and burning each page as I completed it in order to shed the unnecessary weight. In retrospect, I am glad no one was around to witness that.

My trail pals thought I was nuts. “Dog” had decided to be a camp counselor. “Worm” was going to bike across America. “Aswah,” a master chef from Chicago, would move to a trail town to work as a cook. And “Poet” (me) was going to be a lawyer? It made perfect sense to me. Like many others, I had developed a new philosophy of “live life like a trail,” where you treat every day, every place, and each person met like a novel and valuable experience. A law school education, in my view, would open a nearly limitless number of doors to such experiences.

I completed my thru-hike on September 20, 2000 and moved to Eugene in July 2001, admitted to Oregon Law. Twelve years later I can still distinctly recall the places and people, the climbs and vistas, and the ubiquitous three-walled privies like I was there yesterday. The practice of law has in many respects lived up to its promise, though I now realize that I failed to factor one observation into my career decision—I didn’t meet a single lawyer on the trail. Apparently, we have difficulty in taking six months off. Regardless, I am planning my next thru-hike—Georgia-to-Maine 2043.